

The rapid deployment of smart grid technologies has helped our nation's electric infrastructure become more responsive. But technology can go only so far in solving our energy problems. We also need electric customers to be part of the solution.

Avista believes that the approach to energy in the long term requires a continuum of energy education for customers—and the utility, using the tools of the digital age, is amending its relationship with them. “Everyone's personal relationship with energy is being altered in real time,” said Roger Woodworth, Avista's vice president for sustainable energy solutions. “We're in transition to a new era for energy.”

In Avista's case, the trigger for change came during the tough 2009 economy, when a rate increase strained the utility-customer relationship. To address this, the utility worked to change its communications with customers by developing outlets for learning and listening. Avista's communications strategy focuses on educating its customers, current and prospective, on the value of energy as a resource and the management of energy consumption through lifestyle choices and energy-efficiency investments.

Continuous Education Practices

Avista's first stage of education is to engage children at the grade school level:

Wattson, the utility's energy watchdog mascot, shares simple ideas for saving energy in a live show, as well as interactively at www.avistakids.com. To involve high school students throughout its service territory, Avista shares the message of using energy wisely with a multimedia competition. In the last two years, the contest received more than 200 videos providing tips and suggestions for an energy-efficient lifestyle.

College students, some of Avista's newest customers, are next in the continuum. Last October, the company started a month-long energy-efficiency competition to challenge on-campus residents at participating universities to reduce energy consumption. In the contest, groups of students try to reach the lowest consumption rate by taking simple steps—for instance, turning off electronics and unplugging chargers when not in use, turning off lights upon leaving a dorm or study room, and not letting the hot water run unused.

Avista also encourages off-campus students to sign up for energy-efficiency kits—part of the utility's “Don't Be a Powermonger” campaign. In the span of a couple months, more than 100 kits have been distributed, and the participants continue to engage on Facebook, self-reporting nearly 12,000 kilowatt-hours of savings. (Visit www.everylittlebit.com/powermongers to learn more and watch a student-acted video on saving energy.)

A CONTINUUM OF ENERGY EDUCATION

By Lisa V. Wood,
executive director of the Institute
for Electric Efficiency.

Whether they are in school or the workforce, the cost of energy can be a large and unexpected financial issue for young adults dealing with their first energy bills. Energy costs also can be burdensome for senior citizens and other customers living on fixed incomes. To respond to these special needs, Avista developed a suite of rebates and online budgeting tools. The interactive “House of Rebates” for residential customers and “Efficiency Avenue” for commercial customers—offered under its www.everylittlebit.com campaign—have resulted in nearly a six-fold increase in processed rebates.

The Customer's Voice

The right communication medium for customer engagement can be just as important as the message itself. To reinforce its continuum approach and ensure connections and interactions with a variety of customers, Avista outreach efforts include using both traditional and social media.

To bring in the customer's voice, Avista launched “Energy on the Street,” a website feature that captures customers' energy-related questions on video with staff experts answering the questions. All questions and answers are posted online in a community-based forum for idea and information exchange between Avista and its customer base.

A major concern for Avista, said Woodworth, is that customers might view energy efficiency as a single-action issue—they might think that they have already done it and can move on to other things. Maintaining interest in an energy-efficient lifestyle requires innovative thinking and persistence. Avista uses multimedia and social networks—its dedicated website for residential energy efficiency offerings, for example, or its blog—to keep the door to customer engagement open.

Redefining its customer communications and outreach approach took Avista 18 months, by Woodworth's calculation. With programs to make all age groups aware of and involved in managing the energy they use, the company makes positive impacts in their lives: Customers benefit from reduced energy use and better information to manage their bills; and Avista benefits from the energy savings behavior those customers have learned—from grade school on. ♦



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ELECTRIC PERSPECTIVES

SMART SAVINGS WITH DISTRIBUTION AUTOMATION

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Mighty Mid-Caps

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**Pole Attachment
Economics**

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The Ozone Challenge