

In 2007-08, Baltimore Gas & Electric's (BGE's) Smart Energy Pricing (SEP) pilot tested customer reaction to smart meters, dynamic prices, and enabling technologies, like energy orbs and automatic air-conditioning cycling switches. "So that the results [would] allow us to design an effective full-scale program," said BGE spokesperson Cheryl Hindes. The program received positive attention from most stakeholders in the smart grid community. So, it was shocking when, this June, the Maryland Public Service Commission (PSC) rejected BGE's proposal to deploy smart meters in its territory—but even more puzzling because the utility had built the proposal on the thorough and positive SEP results.

The decision gives pause to other utilities and stakeholders involved in smart grid rollouts. What did the PSC want?

Despite BGE's outreach to customer groups and PSC staff in and before formal hearings, the commission specified in its final order that it wanted to see a more detailed communication plan for the rollout ahead of time—whereas BGE legitimately expected to develop such a plan in response to the commission's orders and demonstrated their commitment by including \$50 million (10 percent of the smart grid costs) for customer education in their business case. The major lesson for utilities contemplating mass-market meter deployments is to get in front of customer outreach, engagement, and education.

The Strategy

One company that has commission support is Southern California Edison (SCE), which began its meter rollout in September 2009. As of June 26, 2010, SCE had installed more than 990,000 smart meters and plans to install approximately 5 million meters by 2012. According to Paula Campbell, director of the program office at SCE's Edison SmartConnect, the utility has executed this deployment with few problems in a state known for its customer advocacy.

Campbell described the importance of an iterative process in developing the customer communication strategy. "Initially we conducted market research, surveyed customers, and interviewed utilities that went before us," she said. "But we're always trying to adapt and learn from our customers." Having a single, clear, and comprehensive strategy to secure customer buy-in is also crucial. "Edison SmartConnect is about empowering our customers to make informed decisions and to engage in a smart energy lifestyle to save energy, money, and the environment."

SCE's commitment to ensuring that customers understand the program is evident throughout our approach, said Campbell.

Justify the meter deployment. "We're not installing technology for technology's sake. It's to empower customers to make informed decisions" and to know and understand their energy usage.

SMART METER CUSTOMER COMMUNICATION

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

Communicate program logistics. "We inform customers about why's and what's"—when to expect their meter, what to expect during the installation process, what the utility is doing on meter testing/accuracy and data privacy, even what the installation contractors will be dressed like—all communicated on multiple occasions through multiple channels, including direct mail, door

hangers, and dedicated web portals. Moving forward, SCE also plans to utilize dedicated messaging space on standard bills (called "onserts").

Make program materials accessible. "All Edison SmartConnect materials are trilingual: English, Spanish, and, depending on a particular community, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, Cambodian, Vietnamese, and so on."

Making those messages consistent across your network is key. "Edison SmartConnect is rolled into all customer-service efforts at the utility," said Campbell. The contractors installing the meters must be identifiable; bills should communicate the rollout; and every touch point the utility has should enforce the same message that meter rollouts mean achievable benefits for customers.

The Specifics

In the beginning, SCE focused on training customer service reps, but after receiving the same questions over and over, the company developed a set of frequently asked questions and their answers and included that FAQ sheet with every customer's initial contact letter.

- When are smart meters coming?
- How will I know when I'm getting my new smart meter?
- How long will it take to install it?
- Will the meter installation interrupt power for my home?
- Who pays for the meter and how much will it cost?
- Can I sign up to receive a new meter?
- Will new meters and rates mean higher electricity bills?
- Will the smart meter monitor my electricity usage?
- How secure is my energy usage information?

One last lesson: Don't stop at the installation. Let customers know you've been there with a door hanger that tells them what's changed and what hasn't. Currently, SCE's meters read wirelessly but won't start interval billing and data collection until later this year. Some customers will want to begin using their meters on day one. It's important to communicate the timeframe for additional programs and services. As interval billing goes live, SCE will offer customers a welcome kit that explains how to get the most out of their new meters.



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