How can you communicate support for solar while being realistic about its costs?

An Ask E Source answer
By Jessica Bailis

How can you communicate support for solar while being realistic about its costs?

Q:How can we show our support for solar while communicating with customers about its real costs to the utility?

A:To communicate your support for solar without ignoring its implications for overall system costs, it's critical to first understand how your customers perceive your utility and its support for solar. It's also important to understand what messages customers find favorable. To answer your question, we provide:

- Insights from the 2017 E Source Utility DER Strategy Benchmark, including customer perception of utility support for solar and solar website best practices
- Insights from the E Source Residential DER Customer Market Research, particularly research done for the 2016 Residential Solar Rates & Net Metering Working Group and the 2017 Residential Solar Education and Communications Working Group, including examples of favorable messages and communication tips

Customer perception of utilities' support of solar

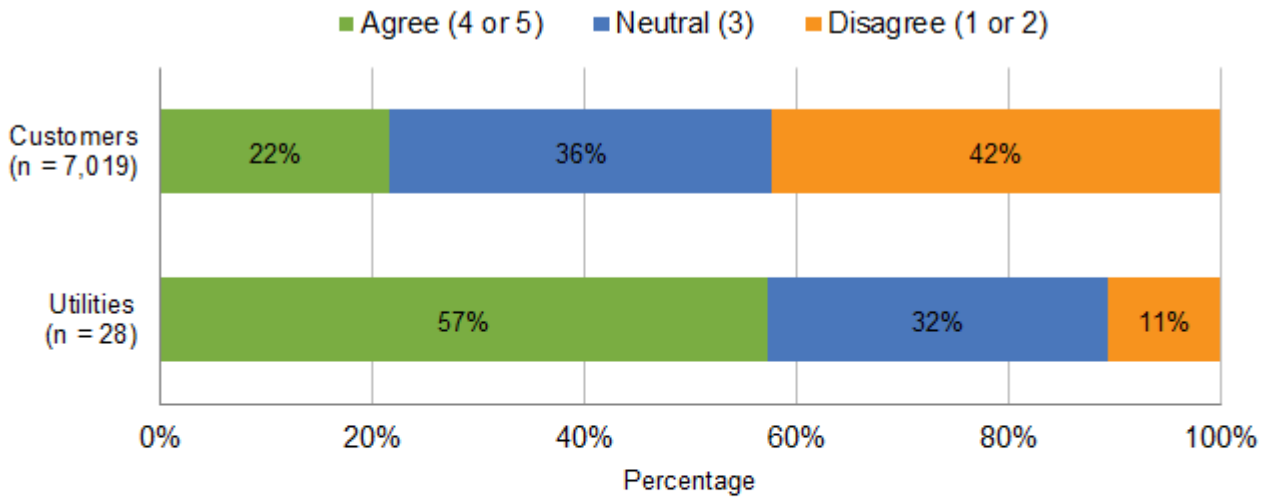
Before communicating about solar, you should understand how customers perceive their utility's support of solar. Customers who believe their utility supports solar are twice as likely to give it an excellent rating, according to our report How Is Rooftop Solar Affecting Utility Rates?, which features findings from our 2017 Utility DER Strategy Benchmark.

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We looked at customers' perceptions of their utility's support of solar and found that only 22% of residential customers believe that their "electric utility supports its customers' use of solar energy." In comparison, 57% of utilities think their customers would agree with this statement (**figure 1**). Therefore, it's important to understand the effects that utility solar communications can have on customers, especially if such communications involve rate-related actions or anything that could be perceived as antisolar.

Figure 1: Customers don’t know their utilities support solar

There’s a disconnect between how utilities think their customers view their support of solar and how supportive customers think the utilities are.



Base: Varies based on study; due to small utility sample size, results are directional only. **Question S1_11:** On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means completely disagree and 5 means completely agree, please indicate how you think your average residential customers and your average business customers would respond to the following statement: “My electric utility supports its customers’ use of solar energy.” **S6_2_3**: On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means completely disagree and 5 means completely agree, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statement: “My electric utility supports its customers’ use of solar energy.”

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Solar website best practices

Examples of top-ranking utility solar web pages based on usability scores from a focus group of residential customers, highlighted in our Solar Website Benchmark 2017: Research Results, include those from Sacramento Municipal Utility District, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. (PG&E), Georgia Power, OUC, and Reliant.

To create positive experiences for customers on your solar website:

- Provide a range of information customers want
- Use customer-friendly language rather than utility jargon
- Provide simple, clear navigation
- Use images and avoid text-heavy layouts

Top-ranked favorable utility messages on rate changes

For our 2016 Residential Solar Rates & Net Metering Communications Working Group, we surveyed more than 7,000 residential customers in the US and Canada on their perception of the fairness of different rate-change options and the associated rationales and messages utilities often use to communicate about changes. We asked respondents to rank statements their electric utility might make

about why it's changing the way it charges all customers based on believability and favorability. For example, California residents ranked these messages as most believable and most favorable:

- Enable more customer choice and control
- Keep electricity affordable for everybody
- Make it easier for you to manage your monthly electricity bill
- Encourage customers to use electricity more efficiently
- Protect low-income customers by keeping their bills low
- More fairly and equitably allocate the costs to provide each customer with the electricity they use
- More accurately reflect the costs of electricity at different times of the day

As part of the same market research effort, we interviewed residents from 11 US states and 1 Canadian province to explore their understanding and acceptance of different rate structures and pricing mechanisms, along with their opinions on messaging for being connected to the grid and the associated costs for solar and nonsolar customers. Again using California as an example, we asked one residential customer how they feel about various examples of utility messaging. Here's what that customer told us.

Utility message: We're making investments in the power grid to provide greater customer choice, convenience, and control.

Response: "I would like it somewhat, and it sounds good on the surface."

Utility message: We're implementing a fixed fee for solar customers to make sure all customers pay their fair share for using the power grid.

Response: "That sounds OK. That should be built in with the system. I can see that because the power grid is directly affected by them, and vice versa—they're affected by it."

Utility message: We're implementing a fixed fee for solar customers to make sure that non-solar customers' bills don't go up because of solar customers.

Response: "Somewhat agree."

Utility message: We're changing the way we bill customers to ensure that their rates are fair and equitable.

Response: "That sounds fair and equitable to me."

Utility message: We're altering the way we charge customers to enable a smooth transition to the power grid of the future.

Response: "'Smooth transition'—I would have to say that sounds favorable."

Members of the E Source Distributed Energy Resource Strategy Service can find the full results of this research, including state- and province-level data and interview transcripts, via our Residential Solar Rates & Net Metering Communications Working Group Resource Center.

Utility examples of solar communications

In October 2017, we hosted an in-person workshop for members of the E Source Residential Solar Education and Communications Working Group. One key discussion topic was solar communications, and participating utilities provided examples of what they're doing in this area:

- Tennessee Valley Authority uses first-person language (e.g., "I want") in website headers to tie the content back to the customer, keeping the focus on customer value rather than utility need.
- Westar Energy includes examples of a typical customer's savings on its website; after making this change, participation in the utility's solar program increased from about 1,600 to 20,000 customers.
- Longmont Power and Communications features an online checklist of the solar-installation steps to tell a story and make it easier for customers to make informed decisions.
- Snohomish County PUD and PG&E use icons on their websites to identify which information is customer-related, installer-related, and utility-related.
- Dominion makes it easy for customers to compare options on its website by showing two rooftop solar choices side by side.
- Black Hills Energy includes links to outside information on its website, encouraging customers to learn more.
- City of Palo Alto Utilities provides helpful tools on its website, like a solar calculator.

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