Highlights from the marketing and communications sessions at the Forum 2023

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Key takeaways

- Utilities can better reach low- and moderate-income (LMI) customers by focusing on equity in communications and marketing.
- To best engage customers, meet them where they are in their journey. Ways to do this include using personalized and multilingual communications.
- Forming strong relationships with business customers, recognizable companies, and community organizations can help utilities expand the reach of their marketing efforts with brand recognition and trust.

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Utility professionals from across the US and Canada gathered for the E Source Forum 2023 in Denver to take part in marketing and communications sessions.

Attendees had the opportunity to share their experiences, strategies, and solutions with their peers. They also walked away with new information to help them best prepare for marketing and communications challenges they might face in 2024.

We've highlighted some of the strategies and attendee contributions from the sessions below.

Angelica Pereira, solution director of marketing, communications, and account management at E Source, had this to say about the event:

> Utility executives left the marketing and communications sessions with appreciation and hope. They gained a renewed sense of appreciation for their fellow team members and their contributions that keep them moving along the right path. They also left with new ideas to bring back to their teams that gave them hope for achieving their goals.

Creating effective program marketing strategies with market research data

In this session, presenters highlighted successful program marketing campaigns at their utility. They shared their utilities' strategies and gave the attendees advice they could use for their campaigns.

Would you like market research data to help you tailor your marketing campaigns?

Learn how we can field a study in your service territory through the E Source Market Research Service to get personalized data about your customers. Fill out this short form to start a conversation about your needs and how we can help.

The key takeaways from this session were:

- Meet your customers where they are in the customer journey. Use market research to identify barriers to and motivators for program participation.
- Utilities can become the trusted source of information on EVs and energy-efficient appliances by providing customers the resources and tools they need.
- Partnering with recognizable companies and private businesses is valuable for utilities because it provides brand recognition and inherent trust.

How SRP promoted its BYOT program

Eamonn Urey, senior product manager for demand response programs at SRP, spoke to attendees about the successful campaign for the utility's Bring Your Own Thermostat (BYOT) program.

To reach LMI customers, SRP:

- Applied to Google's low-income program grant and worked with the company to source smart thermostats
- Sent program offers in official SRP envelopes that customers were more likely to open than standard mailers
- Used its online marketplace for program enrollment and to offer customers a variety of efficient

appliances

As part of the BYOT program, SRP sent out over 9,000 energy savings kits with smart thermostats to customers, helping them reduce their utility bills.

SDG&E's strategies for marketing utility EV programs

Natasha Contreras, customer engagement manager at SDG&E, spoke to attendees about the utility's LOVEELECTRIC EV campaign.

Contreras's advice for overcoming common barriers to EV adoption was to provide education and resources. For the LOVEELECTRIC campaign, SDG&E focused on:

- Promoting EVs as a smart investment
- Reassuring customers that EV range is no longer restrictive
- Making customers aware of available EV options

SDG&E partnered with dealerships to provide customers with accurate information and training on EV charging rates, options, and tools.

SDG&E also collaborated with its employees to promote EVs. To do this, SDG&E turned employees into EV ambassadors by helping them purchase an EV, starting an EV club, and empowering them to promote EVs by word of mouth.

Come to the clubhouse

Together, members of the club share valuable lessons, receive peer feedback, and take part in training to learn new skills.

During our meeting, we'll discuss strategies for marketing EVs and present our latest market research data. For the second half of the meeting, we'll host attendee-led conversations. Whether you're working through a challenging problem or have a simple question, this is your chance to seek advice and connect with your peers.

Join us at the November 2023 Marketing and Communications Club.

Shaping tomorrow together: Building strong utility-business alliances

This session focused on developing and maintaining strong relationships with business customers and identifying what utilities could use to tell better stories to their key accounts.

We hosted a panel discussion with the following guest speakers:

- Bill Sparks, manager, commercial and key accounts, Austin Energy
- Priyanka Gupta, manager, marketing customer insights and strategy, Enbridge Gas
- Tracey Somers, program lead, NB Power

The speakers shared their advice on working with business customers.

Sparks advised attendees to understand how their customers differ and work on building trust and credibility with them.

Gupta suggested developing trusting relationships with business customers and using a personalized approach to meet their needs. She stressed the importance of collaborating with customers to achieve sustainability goals.

Somers recommended engaging audiences with customized programs. She also advised lending more support to customers who need it and always considering equity in engagement strategies.

LMI customer engagement: Rethinking and tailoring your outreach strategies

According to the US Department of Energy, 44% of all US households are low income. And the national average energy burden for LMI households is three times higher than it is for non-LMI households. While LMI customers show a high interest in saving energy and money, LMI customer enrollment in programs to do so is low.

Sign up for the "Trends and insights: Marketing and communications" newsletter

Sign up today to stay up to date on the latest in marketing and communications. Each month, we'll update you on what's trending, answer questions, and inform you of what's on the horizon for E Source.

During the "LMI customer engagement: Rethinking and tailoring your outreach strategies" session, we shared tips for building equity into your LMI campaigns. These included:

- Design broadly accessible, relatable campaigns
- Use multiple languages and marketing channels
- Reflect the diversity of the audiences you're trying to reach in the images you use

Panelists from ComEd, Ameren Illinois, and Avista Utilities spoke with attendees about:

- Strategies for engaging LMI customers with assistance programs
- Ways to simplify program enrollment and qualification
- How to build LMI customers' trust in their utility

Effective solutions to win your customers' attention

In this session, three solution providers gave attendees advice about methods to hold their customers' attention.

Tango Card. Cameron Johnson, senior business development director at gift card rewards and services company Tango Card, spoke about how the company engages customers, including:

- Rewarding customers with digital payments that include gift cards and cash
- Giving customers flexibility in how they use their rewards, including donating the rewards to a nonprofit or using them to purchase necessities like groceries
- Supporting a wide range of programs to meet customers' needs

Questline Digital. Nina Cummins, senior director of key accounts at content marketing agency Questline Digital, explained how the company increases energy efficiency program participation with monthly newsletters. The newsletters interest customers by:

- Featuring relevant content and incentives
- Allowing less-formal communication with customers
- Including links to program landing pages and program information

Mower. Stephanie Crockett, president and CEO of marketing communications agency Mower, discussed improving residential consumers' awareness of heat pumps by:

- Creating unique personas from behavior insights and interests for customers most likely to buy a heat pump
- Using campaign imagery of customers enjoying the comfort a heat pump provides
- Using a multichannel marketing approach that included magazine covers, social media, and direct mail

After the presentations, attendees asked the panel questions about topics like:

- Overcoming customer suspicion with email communications
- Using data to create better customer personas
- Customer segmentation

Capstone workshop: Marketing and communications

See the winners of the E Source 2023 Utility Ad Awards Contest

During a special session at the Forum, we recognized the winners of our 15th annual Utility Ad Awards Contest.

The Utility Ad Awards Contest is the energy industry's largest and most comprehensive ad campaign competition, attracting hundreds of entries each year.

In the final session, attendees discussed topics in large and small groups. The moderators assigned topics, including:

- Addressing customer anxiety about affording their utility bills, rate increases, and the future
- Integrating assistance into customer conversations around rate increases and utility programs
- Explaining payment options and utility programs to small and midsize business (SMB) customers
- Optimizing multilingual marketing and communications for diverse customers
- Communicating with the public about utility equity challenges, initiatives, goals, and progress

The groups answered the following questions:

- How are you challenged to address the topic?
- What are you currently doing to address the topic?
- What would you like to do to address the topic?

Some things attendees said they'd like to do to address their topic included:

- Developing resource centers, events, and partnerships for SMBs
- Providing video testimonials and customer case studies
- Working with translators to provide multilingual content
- Partnering with community organizations to expand customer outreach

Save the date!

Start planning your own marketing and communications experience at the E Source Forum 2024. Join us October 8–11 in Denver!

Learn more

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