

Always On

Always On: Engineering Strategic Communication to Strengthen Member Relationships

Executive Summary

The “Always On” initiative will help electric co-ops stay connected to their members in this era of rapid change. Prompted by the work of NRECA’s blue-ribbon panel of CEOs known as the **Innovative Energy Strategies Task Force** (2009–2010), the Council of Rural Electric Communicators created this report to enable co-ops to better engage members and shape their expectations through strategic external communication. “Always On” defines communicators’ roles and responsibilities for our dynamic, 24/7 world. The report also is meant to help co-op CEOs and communicators evaluate their organization’s current communication readiness and provide recommendations for aligning strategic communication with operational success.

For years, co-ops have worked to increase system reliability and enhance power quality to meet their members’ demand for always-on electricity. Now, co-ops must invest in the infrastructure required to fulfill the new consumer mandate: the demand for always-on communication.

Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Six Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments



Always On: Engineering Strategic Communication to Strengthen Member Relationships

A Project of the Council of Rural Electric Communicators

Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Electric cooperatives face unprecedented challenges and opportunities in the next 10 years. In preparation, every cooperative must look strategically at how to assess and meet its members’ changing expectations. We suggest that cooperatives re-examine the communication function and invest in the infrastructure required to build an even stronger network of relationships to enable the co-op to communicate proactively with members. Such an approach will enable co-ops to stay close to the interests of their members, while helping co-op management achieve its operational goals.

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

For 75 years, electric co-ops built the infrastructure that brought a better way of life to the far reaches of our country. Our business has been stringing lines and providing safe, reliable and affordable electric service. Our standard of success has been providing “always-on” electricity.

CEOs and engineers have never stopped “storm-hardening” the generation, transmission and delivery system through investments in equipment and employee training. They have always understood that sound investments—ahead of time—will save many times their dollar value in outage hours and employee overtime. “Keep the lights on, and the rates low,” was the mantra the 20th century general manager, “and the rest will take care of itself.”

For decades, this infrastructure-focused strategy allowed cooperatives to speak to their membership primarily through their actions. Today, however, it is increasingly risky to rely on our actions to speak for themselves.

One reason for this is that we operate in a rapidly changing industry. Increasingly complex rate structures are resulting from rising fuel costs, renewable energy construction, conservation programs, new government regulations and the brave new world of smart technology. In the future, the complexity of the industry will only increase for co-ops and for co-op members, too.

At the same time, the evolution of communications technology has created an army of consumers who get their information and form their opinions from a wide variety of sources beyond the local co-op. Co-op members are constantly bombarded by news and commentary of varying quality.

Unfortunately, this new abundance of resources does not always make people better informed. The newer, more immediate avenues of communication have few filters against misinformation. As a result, consumers are often at a loss for determining the facts behind an online “news” story or the implications of an easy “solution” to a complicated problem. The issues are always more complex than sound bites on YouTube, the evening news or the blogosphere.

The Pew Research Center reports adults 55 and above spend more time online than today’s teens.



Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

The collision of two fronts—an increasingly complex energy world and the ability of co-op members to gather information and form opinions in more ways than ever before—has heightened the risks for a cooperative choosing to remain silent on controversial issues. These risks manifest themselves in several ways:

- **Rising consumer expectations:** The information superhighway is littered with debris from high-velocity clashes between consumer expectations and a questionable business service or response.
- **Information overload:** Important information is lost in the clutter of incoming, often conflicting, messages. Energy-related controversies can be inflamed by sound bites or simple visuals, but they can seldom be explained in seven-word phrases.
- **Rapid and viral propagation of controversy:** It has long been said that a happy customer tells one friend about a good experience, but an angry customer tells 10 friends about a bad one. In the age of viral message sharing, that angry customer can share that bad experience with hundreds, or even thousands, of individuals.¹

Additionally, that angry communication can now reach an audience in minutes rather than days. If a controversy develops outside of business hours on social media, members may have already made up their mind about the issue by 8 a.m. the next business day. Once a narrative is established painting the cooperative as being in the wrong, it will take much more work to correct the problem.²

These factors have combined to create headaches wherever factual information is lacking. For example, certain smart meters have been blamed, without evidence, for causing cancer. Rising electricity prices are often blamed on utility mismanagement rather than rising fuel prices and costly new regulations. Spectacular controversies have arisen when cooperatives have failed to practice the basic communication principle of listening to their membership. In other instances, more proactive communication might have prevented members at some cooperatives from developing unrealistic expectations. Actions

Finding effective ways to share information with members can help cut through the clutter of information overload. So can a well-structured communication plan.

will continue to speak louder than words, but those actions may not speak loud enough on their own.

Rather than succumb to the risks the new media present, many cooperatives have embraced the new media for the

opportunities they present: opportunities to listen and receive member feedback, as well as opportunities to reach members with useful information.

It is no coincidence that CEOs on NRECA’s **task force on energy innovation** identified “managing member expectations” as their first recommendation for the future. But this can happen only with an ongoing commitment to member communication supported by the communicator and the cooperative he or she serves.

The Council believes co-ops can and will engineer networks of member relationships necessary to withstand the storms of this new century.



Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

Building a Different Kind of Network

How does a cooperative prepare itself for the discussion of complex issues in an era of rapidly evolving member expectations?

We cannot predict what specific public policy challenges and market threats may lie ahead, but by investing in community relationships and ongoing communication, co-ops can generate the trust and support they will need from their members to meet these threats. The challenge now is to storm-harden each cooperative’s community and member relationships through effective and strategic communication. The recently established **Cooperative Purpose Initiative** offers community engagement and social media guides to support these efforts.

As communication technology used by co-op members has evolved, so too must the communication function at local co-ops. Many co-ops have become effective at responding to controversies, but we must work harder to influence member expectations proactively, lending perspective on industry developments before controversies develop.

This will require a communication policy of—

- **Making communication an integral part of the co-op’s strategic plan**, and not just a support function for that plan³
- **Taking the initiative and engaging with members** about evolving issues such as rising energy costs to build loyalty and grassroots political strength⁴

- **Meeting members on their own turf**, across multiple communication channels⁵
- **Establishing the co-op as a trustworthy source of information** and as a guide for understanding complex energy issues⁶

Although difficult to measure in terms of return on investment, such a policy is as strategically valuable as equipment maintenance or vegetation management.

It is critical to the future stability of the cooperative network that communicators accept responsibility for demonstrating their strategic potential to their cooperatives.

Strategic communication mitigates risk by establishing the relationships necessary to help cooperatives weather social storms. The goodwill that results can dampen rumor and suspicion, encouraging members to listen to the co-op’s side of the story when controversies arise.

Furthermore, if cooperatives are the first to raise subjects that later become controversial, we can influence member expectations and help frame future discussions.

While avoidance can put cooperatives on the defensive against bad data and false impressions, strategic communication can earn for a cooperative the role of a trusted advisor who is not afraid to share bad news if it helps our members prepare.



Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

What approach should we use to communicate with our members when technologies are evolving overnight?

Advance planning is necessary to make the most of available, but limited, resources. Communications technology continues to evolve rapidly. That increases the responsibility of co-op communicators to—

- Understand and appreciate the ramifications of technology
- Learn how to leverage the capabilities of technology to benefit the cooperative

Any long-term plan for making the most of new technologies must be easily adaptable and expandable. It also must be focused on strategic goals rather than on delivery methods that may change or disappear over the course of a decade.

The dynamic nature of the energy industry and communications technology argues for a roles-based approach to defining effective communication, rather than a task-based approach. This offers several advantages:

- It keeps the focus on building strong relationships with members and other stakeholders, rather than on a static list of tasks.
- It emphasizes the effectiveness of communication, rather than its cost or quantity.
- It encourages open-ended thinking, putting no upper limit on how well a role may be fulfilled.
- It outlines a path for the career growth of communicators that is based on the needs of the organization and the priorities of the CEO.

This project outlines six key roles into which communication responsibilities can be grouped. For more details, see [Appendix 2](#).

1. **Technician:** Hands-on tactical application of communication technology
2. **Artist:** Creative telling of the story through visual or verbal imagery
3. **Listener:** Active gathering of information and understanding
4. **Advocate:** Guiding the co-op’s collective membership, advising individual members, sharing information with the public
5. **Manager:** Strategically allocating and overseeing established communication resources
6. **Innovator:** Creative strategizing that considers and suggests new solutions, perhaps using new resources to make a new vision become reality.

These are not separate employment positions. Rather, they are responsibilities that should be filled by a person or a group of people associated with any electric co-op.

The listening role, for instance, is ideally shared by all employees. At some co-ops, several roles may be grouped under one person, such as the technician, artist and advocate roles. It may even be possible to automate some of the more routine responsibilities, by providing on-line information or using interactive voice response systems.

A visual representation of these communication roles is depicted in the Communication Roles Matrix on page 6. The matrix shows the relationship between the strategic development of the lead communicator and the cooperative’s communication readiness.



Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

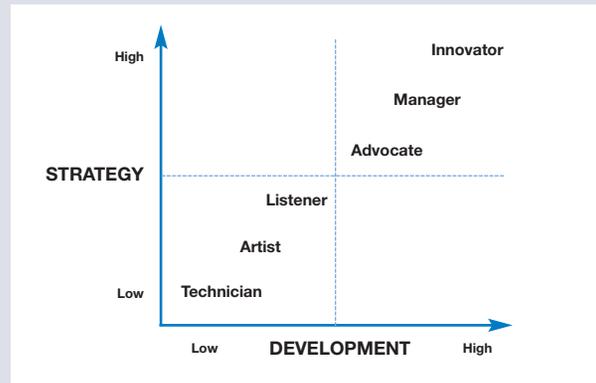
Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

The Communication Roles Matrix



The lead communicator’s level of strategic development (x-axis), as well as his or her knowledge of, and participation in, the co-op’s strategic planning process (y-axis), have a direct impact on a cooperative’s communication readiness. Co-ops need capabilities at all levels of the matrix, but the skill sets that are the most strategic and that require the most development and investment are those that fulfill the roles in the upper right quadrant of the chart.

The expectations for communicators will grow as their strategic value, and hence their responsibilities, grow. There is no end-point, however, at which the communicator has finished growing. Changes in the industry will require continuous training, even after all roles have been filled.

Another way of thinking of communication development or readiness is to equate it to the value it can provide to the CEO. The more the communicator’s development and inclusion in the co-op strategic planning process increases, the more effective the communication function becomes and the more valuable it is to the CEO.

It should be noted that this roles-based approach implies a high standard against which communicators should be measured if they are to provide the level of strategic support that co-ops will need in the years ahead.

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

This section includes steps for improving an electric co-op’s communication readiness. Because we are advocating raised expectations for the overall performance of communicators, a number of these recommendations involve the investment of time and resources to develop knowledgeable and innovative professional communicators at each cooperative. Regardless of the resources available, however, every cooperative can benefit by becoming better prepared for the controversies that inevitably lie ahead.

Eight broad recommendations are grouped into three categories requiring different levels of preparation: Storm Hardening, Storm Tracking, and Emergency Response. The storm metaphor is not intended to be alarmist, but as a device for communicating the importance of readiness.

Following the recommendations is the Communication Readiness Tool. It is a series of questions communicators and CEOs can use to evaluate their own organization according to the three categories of communication preparation. The questions should help CEOs measure their cooperative’s communication readiness against an ideal. Affirming the status of your organization’s current communication readiness will provide a useful roadmap to help prepare for the future, regardless of how the industry or communication technologies may evolve.



Below are eight broad recommendations of what co-ops can do to improve their communication readiness.

The recommendations are grouped into three categories involving different levels of commitment and preparation.

Category 1: Storm Hardening Strategically Focusing Your Cooperative's Communication

This highest readiness level offers the most value to a cooperative and its CEO from an investment in strategic communication. Achieving this level of readiness requires success in Categories 2 and 3.

With a mission-critical focus on investing in the appropriate communications infrastructure, cooperatives can establish more permanent relationships with members and other stakeholders that minimize the damage when a communication storm occurs.

Recommendation 1: From the Top Down, Embrace Strategic Communication

Recommendation 2: Develop a "Steer into the Skid" Communication Philosophy

Recommendation 3: Employ Skilled and Trained Communication Professionals

Recommendation 4: Invest in and Expect More from Strategic Communicators

Category 2: Storm Tracking Proactively Engaging in Communication

Although it is best for any system to be storm hardened, a co-op with limited resources can mitigate the impact of a storm by proactively reassigning resources to where the storm is likely to strike. Similarly, when dealing with a developing communication storm, early action can sometimes dissipate the front before it does serious damage.

No aspect of the communication strategy is more valuable than active listening. These recommendations vary in cost and scope, but they can help give co-ops early warning about potential problems. In addition to allowing cooperatives time to prepare, a "listening attitude" and demonstrated awareness of member concerns can often turn away a storm before it arrives in force.

Recommendation 5: Make Corporate Listening Part of Your Communication Strategy

Recommendation 6: Communicate Regularly

Category 3: Emergency Response Being Nimble Responsive to Communication Crises

The best cure is prevention, but even in the absence of resources for strategic communication, co-ops must respond well with available resources once rough weather develops.

According to the Cooperative Research Network report, *2008 Best Practices for Utility Storm Response*, effective power restoration efforts include three important features: a clear command structure, advance consideration of worst-case scenarios, and practice drills. Effective emergency response communication would possess the same features.

Recommendation 7: Establish Clear Lines of Authority and Responsibility for Communication

Recommendation 8: Consider the Worst Case Communication Scenarios Before They Become Reality

For more detail on these recommendations, see [Appendix 1](#).

Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for "Always On" Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments



These sample questions are designed to assist cooperative executives and communicators evaluate their strategic communication readiness. The questions are tied to the three categories of communication preparation described on page 8.

This exercise should help co-ops identify areas of strength as well as areas that may need improvement. Co-ops that can answer “Yes” to a group of questions are likely prepared in that area. Answering “No” to a question leads to a set of recommendations that can help co-ops refocus their efforts on becoming more fully prepared for “Always On” communication.

Note: These sample questions and recommendations are meant to be a starting point for evaluating and improving your co-op’s communication function. They are not a comprehensive list of techniques for achieving strategic communication readiness.

Is Your Co-op Ready for Always On Communication?

A Tool for Evaluating Communication Readiness

STRATEGIC (Storm Hardening)

Does your cooperative provide accurate, original and interesting printed and digital materials that communicate your cooperative’s most important goals and concerns?

Do your strategic plan and budget reflect sufficient direction and support to make communication a mission-critical priority?

Do you trust your lead communicator to “have the CEO’s back” on emerging member concerns, public controversies and outside threats to your cooperative’s success? Does he or she use discernment, initiative and resourcefulness to actively listen for, anticipate and keep the executive team informed?

Does your lead communicator sufficiently demonstrate the following qualities such that he or she offers key support for your executive team: Critical thinking and analytical ability? Demonstrated insight regarding the core issues affecting cooperative governance, finance, operations, engineering and human resources? At least mid-level understanding of the business environment in which your cooperative operates, including influences from the industry, government, the economy and public opinion? A talent for suggesting creative solutions to challenges facing your cooperative?

Recommendations:

1. From the Top Down, Embrace Strategic Communication
2. Develop a “Steer into the Skid” Communication Philosophy
4. Invest in and Expect More from Strategic Communicators

PROACTIVE (Storm Tracking)

Does your cooperative make it a priority to provide members with advance information about issues that may affect them, especially if the news is unpleasant?

Do your communication and your information technology staffers have shared goals that provide for multiple and varying avenues of secure, but easy communication with your cooperative’s members?

Is your lead communicator empowered to manage communication on behalf of the cooperative except in evolving situations in which the CEO’s own concerns and sensibilities are still developing? Managing communication includes allocating resources and personnel within a budget, issuing or routing communications without consultation, and developing and implementing communication strategies.

Does your lead communicator demonstrate “ownership” of communication goals, such that even without the CEO’s guidance, he or she continually improves the cooperative’s overall messaging, communication strategy and relationships with members?

Does your communicator understand the CEO’s sensibilities regarding member concerns, public controversies and outside threats to your cooperative’s success?

Recommendations:

3. Employ Skilled and Trained Communication Professionals
5. Make Corporate Listening Part of Your Communication Strategy
6. Communicate Regularly

RESPONSIVE (Emergency Response)

Would most 20-year-old, 45-year-old and 70-year-old members of your cooperative agree that they find it easy to interact with your cooperative, whether in person or through the media of their choice?

Whether with words, graphics, photos or videos, do your cooperative’s messages create a compelling story for your members and the rest of the public?

Does your co-op have a plan for providing member communication options that are as good as or better than those offered by local banks, colleges, technical institutes, hospitals and emergency management agencies?

If the CEO were absolutely unavailable, and a situation demanded an immediate public response, would someone else have the knowledge and be empowered to answer accurately and effectively on behalf of the cooperative?

Recommendations:

7. Establish Clear Lines of Authority and Responsibility for Communication
8. Consider the Worst Case Communication Scenarios Before They Become Reality



Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

A Bright Future

The Council sees a bright future for electric cooperatives. We take seriously the challenges ahead, but in preparing, we also are getting ready for unprecedented opportunities.

If forecasts about the speed of change of technology and culture are even half right, electric cooperatives may be genetically predisposed to success in the years ahead. New technologies will continue to fuel economic growth well into the 21st century by enabling human collaboration on a larger and larger scale. But rather than dread this development, we should recognize that cooperatives, by virtue of being close to our members, are uniquely placed to take advantage of these developments and further strengthen the member-cooperative relationship. After all, long before today’s technologies arose, our predecessors cooperatively lit a path to 20th century prosperity.

The free flow of information also has inspired global demands for institutional transparency and accountability. Once again, consumer-owned utilities have already forged

a path, embodying these qualities more naturally than other energy companies. When economic bubbles shake the country’s confidence and trust, the loyalties of electric cooperatives are refreshingly simple and clear: we exist only to serve our consumer-members. It is a business model that encourages mutual aid and innovation in pursuit of cost-effective solutions. The success of the Touchstone Energy® Cooperatives brand alliance, for example, is a testament to the cooperative principles and business model.

In addition, engaging in the **Cooperative Purpose Initiative** will strengthen our communication efforts as we work to build member loyalty.⁷

So the cooperative network is naturally suited for excelling in an era of rapid change and rising member expectations. We have a history of adapting well to the winds of change. Our best path forward, therefore, is continuing the tradition of innovative accomplishment established by those who first electrified rural America.



Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

Recommendation 1: From the Top Down, Embrace Strategic Communication

The priorities for any organization are set by those in charge. For that reason, it is vitally important that the CEO clearly express the intent and requirement that ongoing strategic communication will be part of any strategic planning on behalf of the cooperative, including the budgeting process. ■

Recommendation 2: Develop a “Steer into the Skid” Communication Philosophy

Most drivers experience at some point the heart-pounding stress of momentarily losing control of a vehicle on a wet or icy road. When that happens, instinct tells them to slam on the brakes and steer away from obstacles. But doing so can send the vehicle spinning sideways toward the very thing they want to avoid. Experienced drivers know the best way to regain control is to turn the wheel in the direction the vehicle is already sliding, gently tapping the brakes (or letting anti-lock brakes engage) until the tires grab the road.

In the same way, avoiding communication on a sensitive issue will only cause a cooperative to lose control of its message and its reputation. When controversy is inevitable, cooperatives that accept the slide and steer into the skid will ride through the experience with fewer dents and scrapes.

Communicate new industry issues early if they may directly affect the cooperative’s membership. Early communication on complex issues has many benefits:

- It ensures your cooperative’s perspective will be part of the dialog.
- It establishes your credibility for discussing the issue again in the future.
- When an issue later develops into controversy, there is value in being able to point to previous communication on the subject.

Err on the side of transparency when there are no proprietary, regulatory, legal or ethical limitations. It is always important to understand a cooperative’s obligations to protect internal information. Whenever it is possible to share information responsibly, however, transparency provides opportunity to frame the discussion, providing context and perspective on the issue in question.

Go where the members go when selecting media. With the arrival of each new communications technology and popular new medium, the expectations of cooperative members change. It is critically important to remember that different segments of the population expect different types of communication. New technologies bring new challenges, but the cooperative network must lead the way, creatively envisioning new ways to anticipate and exceed our members’ rising expectations. ■



Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

Recommendation 3: Employ Skilled and Trained Communication Professionals

Just as every distribution cooperative needs staffers who are focused on the design, planning and operation of the distribution grid, cooperatives and CEOs are not fully supported without a competent, qualified staffer who is focused on the cooperative’s communication and its ongoing relationship with its members.

Hiring: To support the cooperative and the CEO most effectively, the lead communicator at any cooperative should be hired not only for his or her communication talent and technical skills, but also for the following:

- Leadership ability
- Analytical skills
- Willingness and ability to embrace complex technical and financial concepts
- Critical thinking skills
- Ability to prioritize
- Ability to think clearly under pressure
- Penchant for strategic thinking.

Communication Training: Whether hiring new communicators or investing in those already employed, cooperatives have at their disposal some outstanding training programs, which were developed with the ongoing advice of leading cooperative communicators. They include:

New Co-op Communicator Orientation: An intensive, two and one-half-day immersion program offered through NRECA to dramatically shorten the learning curve for employees new to the cooperative network and business model.

Certified Cooperative Communicator (CCC) Program:

A self-study, portfolio development and certification program guided by a board of active co-op communicators recognized by their peers as leaders in the field. Communicators at NRECA member co-ops have developed and continually update the extensive body of knowledge upon which this program is based.

Annual CONNECT Conference: Information and updates on energy and communication issues, related innovations and technologies. At CONNECT, communicators can participate in the Spotlight on Excellence Awards program, find examples of best practices, and gain opportunities to network with and learn from their colleagues. This is especially valuable because as a specialized employee, a co-op’s communicator may be somewhat isolated from peers. ■

Recommendation 4: Invest in and Expect More from Strategic Communicators

For communication professionals to meet their strategic potential, they must be active, curious and persistent in learning the key factors that drive executive, financial and operational decisions at their co-ops. Only the CEO, however, can enable his or her staff to grasp the subtleties and sensitivities that separate one cooperative’s priorities from another’s. Electric cooperatives share many factors in common, but they each have their own unique set of financial, governmental, operational and social challenges.

For these reasons, it is important that CEOs ensure their communicators are given the tools they need to achieve this understanding. The following are low-cost suggestions that can help achieve this goal:



Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

Involve the lead communicator in all staff meetings and strategic planning sessions. These discussions help a communicator understand key issues facing the cooperative and the CEO’s reasoning about them. For their part, communicators can help anticipate member reactions and develop strategies for communicating the cooperative’s perspective and answering member concerns.

Copy the lead communicator on board mailings. One of the best ways to keep a communicator briefed on upcoming developments is by sharing the written briefings that go to the board of directors. For obvious reasons, this need not include human resource issues or other highly confidential information.

Share the CEO perspective on developing issues, and cooperate with the communicator’s self-education process. This can be as easy as sharing a reading list, copying employees on web links and scheduling one-on-one conversations from time to time.

Although the next suggestion is not cheap, its value cannot be overestimated for helping a communications professional grow his or her strategic value to the cooperative:

Management Internship Program: A six-week educational program focused on electric co-op management issues, providing managers from all fields with a deeper understanding of management itself, as well as the strategic goals and challenges of all co-op departments. ■

Recommendation 5: Make Corporate Listening Part of Your Communication Strategy

All effective communication starts with listening. We cannot know what messages to send our members without knowing what our members think, understand, care about, believe and want from their cooperative.

As human beings, we prefer delivering (and hearing) good news over bad news, and so the natural instinct is to avoid the bad news. For an electric cooperative, however, this instinct can be self-destructive. Whether good news or bad, a healthy cooperative will view all incoming communication as useful.

All electric co-ops want technology that can identify as quickly as possible when there is a power problem on our system. Whether we know about a substation transformer failure or not, hundreds or thousands of our members will still be in the dark. But the sooner we know about the problem, the shorter the outage time, and the happier our members will be.

Similarly, we are better off knowing sooner, rather than later, if our members are growing unhappy with their electric co-op. Only by listening can we identify misunderstandings or legitimate problems that need to be addressed.

For an electric co-op, listening means opening numerous pathways by which members can communicate their perspectives to us. The following options are listed in order from least to most expensive to implement, although it should be realized that there is also expense associated with the failure to listen.



Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

- Train employees to welcome all member feedback, whether positive or negative, and thank members for it. Market research tells us that for every complaint a company receives, there are 10 customers who are angry but will not call. Co-op members who take the time to call or visit an office, whether to criticize or compliment, are providing an opportunity for a stronger relationship.
- Regularly ask front-line employees to list five issues they hear about most often from members.
- Establish a social media policy that at the very least permits the lead communicator to monitor social media. Although we recommend participation in the public dialog through social media, if nothing else, the lead communicator should be able to actively monitor social media messaging, in order to listen for developing problems.
- Provide low-cost methods by which members can send feedback, such as providing an anonymous survey form through the cooperative’s website, or by offering feedback cards in the office, bill inserts or at meetings. By inviting this kind of feedback, cooperatives also are sending an important message: “We care what our members think.”
- Professional surveys: a professionally conducted member survey can cost several thousand dollars, but the results can justify the costs.
 - Surveys reach statistically significant randomized samples of members, rather than those who are angry enough or happy enough to call or visit the offices.
 - Surveys can identify negative trends before they become a threat to the cooperative’s stability.
 - They also can identify positive trends that provide early confirmation about new member outreach tactics.
 - They can indicate changing member expectations that otherwise might take several more years to discover.
 - In addition, professional surveys that include questions from the *American Customer Satisfaction Index* can allow cooperatives to compare their member satisfaction with other utilities and even companies in other industries. ■

Recommendation 6: Communicate Regularly

Reliable, regular communication is more important than flashy production because it establishes and maintains credible channels. Furthermore, organizations need practice at communicating in order to do it effectively. The most effective relationships with members are built up over time, not all at once. When budgets are tight, regular communication can be handled in various cost-effective ways:

- The co-op website
- News releases on newsworthy and human interest topics
- Bill inserts
- Electronic newsletters
- The judicious use of social media. ■

Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

Recommendation 7: Establish Clear Lines of Authority and Responsibility for Communication

This step should be undertaken with the following important considerations in mind:

- What issues is the lead communicator responsible for and authorized to address as a matter of course?
- What issues will be communicated only by, or with direct guidance from, the CEO?
- If the CEO is unreachable, who is authorized to speak for the cooperative in an emergency, and under what limitations may he or she do so?
- Who is NOT authorized to speak for the cooperative, and are they aware of their responsibility to refer inquiries to those who do have that responsibility?
- What is the cooperative’s policy toward the use of social media by employees to discuss issues related to the cooperative? ■

Recommendation 8: Consider the Worst Case Communication Scenarios Before They Become Reality

Cooperatives may not be ready to proactively and publicly communicate on every issue, but many issues are forced upon cooperatives without warning. A careless word at such a time can turn an unpleasant situation into a member relations disaster. Advance consideration of themes and situations, just like fire drills and other emergency exercises, can prepare cooperative personnel to respond well even under stress. Discussion should take place ahead of time, under consultation with the CEO, on informal language, themes and strategies for addressing surprising, controversial or sensitive issues. This can be in writing or informal discussion, as long as it is clear what the expectations are should these situations arise. Examples of situations that might benefit from advance planning include:

- Inquiries by journalists during weather or other emergencies
- Surprise media inquiries researching a controversy
- Requests for member lists
- Requests for information about personnel
- Demands for disclosure of proprietary information
- Inquiries about inappropriate actions by employees or board members
- Requests for information about injury accidents or electrical contact accidents. ■



Appendix 2: Six Key Roles for Communicators

More detail on the roles into which communication responsibilities can be grouped as introduced on page 5.

Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

1. Communicator as Technician: A core set of technical skills will always be important for communicators. The trend in recent years, however, has been to outsource time-consuming technical tasks like html programming and data processing as new technologies mature. If competence at a technical task requires hours or weeks of training, it may be more effective to outsource those tasks. The time a communicator might spend learning and refreshing skills at programming applications for smart phones, for instance, might be better spent on activities that reap more strategic benefits for the CEO and the cooperative. More strategic pursuits would include tasks associated with the listener, advocate, manager and innovator roles.

2. Communicator as Artist: This role includes tasks such as writing, design, drawing, photography, video-graphy and sound mixing. Although artistry is more specialized than technical competence, certain aspects of artistry can be applied by third-party specialists, regardless of their familiarity with electric cooperatives. It is not unusual for desktop publishing and graphic design to be outsourced, for instance.

If a design specialist can match the technical quality of an in-house communicator at a reasonable price, cooperatives may find it useful to hire a third party to work under the guidance of a cooperative communicator. This can free a communicator’s time for more strategic pursuits, such as those associated with the listener, advocate, manager and innovator roles.

3. Communicator as Listener: This under-appreciated role incorporates responsibilities such as market research, soliciting member feedback, news tracking, trend watching and service as rumor watch-guard.

Several CEOs consulted for this project commented that they need communicators who can “have their backs” with regard to spotting developing problems.

Rather than having a sole listener, however, the most effective communicators will help the CEO develop a “culture of listening” that involves all cooperative employees.

This is a role that must be always on, whenever and wherever member or public concerns may find a voice.

4. Communicator as Advocate: At its core, advocacy involves telling the story of the cooperative in such a way that the public identifies with that story.

The most effective advocates will be familiar with the technical, financial, legal, regulatory and political issues facing the cooperative, in addition to member service issues. This should be done ahead of time; when the spotlight is on, it is usually too late to learn important subtleties and nuances.

Communicators have a responsibility to educate themselves, but the particular issues and concerns of each cooperative are unique. That’s why it is critical for communicators to be active at staff meetings and any other strategic planning sessions.



Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On”
Communication

Heightened Risks,
Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach
to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for
Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed
Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for
Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

- 5. Communicator as Manager:** The communication manager practices the tools and techniques of the business, while overseeing the budgetary, operational and human resources associated with the communication function.

To provide the most meaningful support to the CEO, this role also involves the “big picture” strategic application of the previous four roles in order to develop a strong network of relationships.

With the sensitivities and priorities of the CEO and the cooperative in mind, the person in this role is responsible for planning, implementing and allocating resources for strategic communication, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of current and past initiatives.

- 6. Communicator as Innovator:** While a manager is responsible for the allocation and direction of existing resources, an innovator will look beyond existing resources and tools to find or create new opportunities.

More than just an “idea person,” an innovator proposes plans for turning those conceptual ideas into reality. If additional resources are needed, an innovator may have to go out and get them to make the project work.

The innovative communicator is always looking for new opportunities on behalf of the cooperative. He or she can visualize answers where others see only questions.



Notes: Additional Resources

Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

1. Online conversations will occur, with or without co-ops. Today’s consumers are accustomed to posting ratings and reviews for products or services online. They also vent online, too. If companies aren’t quick to respond to a service issue posted online, the results can go viral.

“This means cutting down red tape and having the right people and systems in place to provide faster reaction times, authentic responses and genuine engagement. If you don’t do this, you risk dealing with consumer backlash.”

Marina Molenda, “**5 Social Media Pitfalls to Avoid**,” in *Social Media Today*.

2. United Airlines’ failure to resolve customer service issues resulted in highly negative publicity during the “United Breaks Guitars” viral videos on YouTube.

Watch the first video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YGc4zOqozo>

Succeeding videos may be accessed from that page. The story has greatly expanded into its own website, book, speaking tours and case studies.

<http://www.unitedbreaksguitars.com>

3. Communication and the strategic plan: electric co-ops boast a sizable advantage in consumer satisfaction and loyalty compared with other utility providers—an edge attributed to communication efforts. “**Communication is More Than a Side Dish**,” NRECA Market Research.

4. Engaging with members as partners to meet local needs and connect with state and national political leadership: “**Generating Grass Roots Support**,” Touchstone Energy® Best Practices, Withlacoochee Electric Co-op.

5. Meeting members on their own turf: this case study illustrates how one co-op integrates communication across multiple channels to accomplish this. The author was recognized for his commitment to the strategic role of communication with the J.C. Brown CEO Communication Leadership Award. “**The Problem with Communication...**,” James P. Duncan, CEO Sumter Electric Co-op, *NRECA Management Quarterly*.

6. Establishing trust and looking out for consumer-members: efforts to help members save money by motivating them to save energy establish co-ops as trusted sources of information on complex energy issues. “**Inspiring Members to Save Energy**,” Touchstone Energy® Best Practices, Roanoke Electric Co-op.



Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On”
Communication

Heightened Risks,
Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach
to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for
Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed
Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for
Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

7. Resources on customer satisfaction, consumers’ knowledge of energy issues, member expectations and engagement:

- According to J.D. Power & Associates, effective communication is one of the six most important factors of customer satisfaction along with power quality and reliability; price; billing and payment; corporate citizenship; and customer service. [J.D. Power news release.](#)
- Co-op communication helps educate members and engender good will, which can dampen rumor and suspicion. Studies show that most electricity consumers have limited knowledge of energy issues. [Harris Poll news release.](#)

- Co-ops can influence member expectations. Touchstone Energy’s [“National Survey on the Cooperative Difference”](#) identifies several ways co-ops can improve their satisfaction among members and highlights the importance of engaging members to relate to their cooperative.

An engaged member is generally more willing to take action for the cooperative when asked, and is more understanding and supportive of the cooperative during tough times. Proactive communication with members plays a critical role, particularly when explaining the cooperative difference, e.g., when co-ops produce margins they return the money in the form of member dividends or capital credits.



Acknowledgments

Always On is a continuing program of the Council of Rural Electric Communicators. This foundational document and its guidelines were developed as part of a rigorous two-and-a-half year project by the Council, with generous support in time, input, and feedback from numerous CEOs, communication professionals, and other leaders within the electric cooperative network.

Among many others, the Council is grateful to the following individuals and groups:

- Jim Bausell, Senior Vice President, Communications, NRECA
- Martin Lowery, Executive Vice President for Member and Association Relations, NRECA
- The Innovative Energy Strategies Task Force of NRECA
- The Rural Electric Management Development Council
- Our partners on the Certified Cooperative Communicator Program Board of Directors

The Council of Rural Electric Communicators

Jimmy Autry, CCC, APR, Flint Energies, Georgia
Thomas Berg, Cooperative Finance Corporation
Mike Birkeland, Council Secretary, Lake Country Power, Minnesota
Larry Bryant,* Kootenai Electric Cooperative, Idaho
Renee Butler, CREC Program Staff, NRECA
Karen Combs, CCC, Jackson Energy Cooperative, Kentucky
Jim Donahue, CCC, Grand Canyon State Electric Co-op, Arizona
Paula Givens-Bolder, Federated Rural Electric Insurance Exchange
Laura Hengstenberg, CCC, Council Vice President, Crawford Electric Cooperative, Missouri
Mary Laurent, CCC, Southwest Louisiana EMC, Louisiana
Charlie McAlpin, CCC, MBA, Council President, Eastern Maine Electric Co-op, Maine
Eleanor Miller, CCC, NRECA Representative, NRECA
Karen Moore, Baldwin EMC, Alabama
Erica Neff, CCC, Kootenai Electric Cooperative, Idaho
Rick Petty, Logan County Power & Light Association, Ohio
Shana Read, CCC, Kansas Electric Co-op, Inc., Kansas
Keith Stapleton, Sam Houston Electric Cooperative, Texas
Maggie Tilley, CCC, APR,* G&T Communications, Inc., North Carolina
Chris Tryba, CCC, Hoosier Energy REC, Inc., Indiana
Ashley Valdez, CCC Board Chair, San Isabel Electric Association, Inc., Colorado
Jean Van Biezen, CCC,* South Central Indiana EMC, Indiana
Jane Walk, CCC,* Georgia EMC, Georgia
Mike Wilson, CCC, Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative, Illinois
Nell Withers-McCauley, CCC, Peace River Electric Co-op, Florida
Sheila Yount, CCC, Electric Cooperatives of Arkansas

** Past members of the Council and business associates*

Executive Summary

Introduction

It Is Time for “Always On” Communication

Heightened Risks, Heightened Opportunities

Building a Different Kind of Network

A Roles-Based Approach to Communication

Recommendations and Tools for Evaluation and Improvement

Communication Readiness Tool

A Bright Future

Appendix 1: Detailed Recommendations

Appendix 2: Key Roles for Communicators

Notes: Additional Resources

Acknowledgments

