

## CREATED



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## IP ADDRESS



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**\* Name**

Lydia Walters

**\* Job Title**

Communication and Human Resources Manager

**\* Electric Cooperative**

Dixie Electric Power Association

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Mississippi

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**I have paid to receive general feedback on my entry.**

Yes

**\* Name**

Randy Smith

**\* Job Title**

General Manager

**\* Electric Cooperative**

Dixie Electric Power Association

**\* When did the nominee become CEO of this cooperative?**

2011

## Has the nominee served as CEO of another cooperative in the past?

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No

## If yes, where, when and for how long?

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(No response)

### **\* The Cooperative Difference (35 points) – In what ways does the CEO’s commitment to communication, both internal and external, help advance the seven cooperative principles, philosophy and way of doing business? Maximum of 500 words.**

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Since becoming general manager in 2011, Randy Smith has strategically incorporated the Seven Cooperative Principles into the different functional areas of the cooperative.

1. Democratic Member Control – Randy was a proponent for amending the Electric Cooperative Act to allow for online voting for annual meetings in Mississippi. After the amendment passed, Dixie Electric began offering vote online. More than 1,400 members chose the online option in the 2020 annual meeting. He also provided budget money for advertising and newly printed materials to increase participation in the annual meeting. Voting has increased from 3,300 votes three years ago to more than 5,000 votes the past two years.
2. Member Economic Participation – Dixie Electric has returned more than \$33 million in capital credits since 1964. When an uninformed public service commissioner attacked cooperatives through the news media for not returning capital credits, Randy instructed Communication Manager Lydia Walters to write a press release and stand on the co-op’s history of retiring capital credits. He, along with legal counsel, successfully defended the cooperative against an unsubstantiated capital credit lawsuit. Under Randy’s leadership, the co-op’s bylaws, applications and equity plan were well positioned to defend the cooperative.
3. Autonomy and Independence – Early on as general manager, Randy directed the communication team to work with a graphic artist to design and implement a new logo. Previously, Dixie Electric used a couple of different marks, including the state map on letterhead and Willie Wirehand on vehicles. He felt strongly that Dixie Electric needed a branding plan, so a strategic roll out plan and guidelines for proper use were introduced in 2012.
4. Education, Training & Information – Under Randy’s direction, the communication staff has increased communication with members, including two interactive websites, three social media platforms, increased advertising, an executed community relations strategic plan, improved media relations and an expanded youth leadership program. For employees, Randy started an employee orientation day for new employees and for those celebrating five-year service anniversaries and held all-employee meetings to inform employees of upcoming changes in the industry.
5. Cooperative Among Cooperatives – Previously, Dixie Electric rarely sent linemen to other cooperatives to restore power after storms. Under Randy’s leadership, line crews respond when called upon. In 2018, Randy served as president for the Electric Cooperatives of Mississippi (statewide association) board of directors. Under his leadership, the statewide newspaper was converted to a magazine format. To further modernize the publication, Randy appointed the CEO of Coast Electric, Ron Barnes, to chair a committee, made of eight senior communicators in the state, to guide the transition by creating a mission statement, setting strategic goals and defining content expectations.
6. Concern for Community – Randy sat down with the communication team to create a strategic plan for community relations. Although some of the plans were put on hold in 2020, the plan will be carried forward for future years. He is active with the local economic development organizations to encourage job growth and the United Way board of directors, serving as president.

**\* Strategic Approach (25 points) – In what ways does the CEO integrate communication into the organization’s strategic planning and management processes? Maximum 500 words.**

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Strategic planning is a part of Randy Smith’s management style. Prior to Randy, each department was siloed, and the communicator was viewed as an event coordinator not a strategic thinker who communicated with targeted audiences.

The following timeline explains how Randy integrates strategic planning into everyday business:

July 2011 – Randy is promoted to general manager.

Spring 2012 – Randy asks each department manager to compile their strategic department plan, so he can present a cohesive plan to the board.

August 2012 - Randy presents a cross-departmental, long-range plan to the board. The plan included goals, objectives, timeline and general budget figures. Randy had a clear vision for technological advances for the cooperative. He combined these goals with other financial, communication and operational goals, providing the board with a clear vision for Dixie Electric. In the following three years, this benefited the board because they knew about major projects before they voted.

The communication department, consisting of Communication and Human Resources Manager Lydia Walters and the Community Relations Coordinator Pollyanna Magee, were very involved in promoting new technological resources, as defined in this long-range plan. This included a new website, pay online option, real-time outage map, etc. These new services were promoted through traditional and digital advertising, and in Today in Mississippi.

January 2015 - Randy asked each department manager to present their plan for the year to other managers. Lydia Walters presented her department’s communication timeline that included major projects, advertising programs and events. The advertising programs are closely connected to information technology department’s plan because many of the new services for members originate there.

April 2016 – Randy holds a one-day board and management retreat to create a four-year strategic plan. The communication section of the plan focused on communicating with younger members, expanding social media and digital advertising, adding Touchstone Energy and the Co-op Connections program. The goal was also realized to move community relations from reactive corporate philanthropy to strategic contributions, which is the second strategic level on the social accountability continuum.

June 2019 – Randy participates in a strategic planning session with the communication department, focusing on community relations. Member satisfaction research has shown that the community relations Dixie Electric is doing is not resonating with the membership. The strategic plan for 2020 was aimed to change that.

April 2020 – Planning was underway for the second board and management strategic planning session when it had to be canceled due to COVID-19 gathering restrictions and due to four tornadoes that struck Dixie Electric’s service area in an 11-day span. It will be rescheduled for 2021.

Under Randy’s leadership, communication planning is ongoing, and the budget integrates with the plans. Dixie Electric has a thorough crisis communication plan used for the COVID-19 pandemic, tornadoes, attacks from the public service commissioners, capital credit lawsuits, hurricanes, etc. Communication planning is an ongoing process for many activities, events and ventures, including the roll out of the broadband subsidiary DE Fastlink, LLC, award-winning 75th anniversary celebration, youth educational programs, etc.

**\* Integrated Approach (20 points) – In what ways does the CEO demonstrate support for the cooperative’s communication staff? Maximum of 500 words.**

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In 2005, Dixie Electric’s electrical system was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Randy was a distribution engineer at the time and oversaw power restoration in the Waynesboro district. Dixie Electric’s efforts were equivalent to other electric cooperatives, completing restoration in 21 days. The one communicator was overwhelmed with feeding and housing the line crews and was unable to effectively communicate with the local media. This lack of communication damaged Dixie Electric’s reputation.

Randy and the board of directors were profoundly affected by the lack of communication after Hurricane Katrina and since have considered communication with the members and media vital. Communication Manager Lydia Walters is included in every major project at some level and either writes or reviews external communication materials. The communication team now includes three full-time professionals.

In April 2020, Dixie Electric was struck by a devastating EF-4 tornado. The morning after the tornado struck, Randy called Lydia and said, “This is going to be a multi-day restoration. Set expectations that this is going to take some time.” Randy views communication as critical in a crisis. Little did he know when he made that phone call, that Dixie Electric would sustain a total of four tornadoes in an 11-day period and would be faced with two full weeks of restoration. Expectations were set, and the members responded positively.

When Randy approaches a project, he considers those that need to be directly involved and strategically considers when to inform employees. There are numerous examples of Randy communicating directly with employees. One example would be the capital credit lawsuits. Due to concerns about disclosure, Randy organized the second all-employee meeting. He closed the offices on President’s Day, brought the employees in from all three offices, handled routine training like anti-harassment, etc., and he explained the capital credit lawsuits and the cooperative’s response. The employees appreciated him taking the time to explain it.

In summer 2020, Dixie Electric started a broadband subsidiary. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, Randy sent emails to the employees to explain this new business. Question/answer sheets and wallet cards have been prepared for them. Although he can’t meet with them, he has kept them informed.

In 2011, Dixie Electric’s external communication included the monthly member newspaper Today in Mississippi, newspaper advertising and a static website, dixieepa.com. The only internal piece was a quarterly employee newsletter, the Dixie Digest.

The following communication pieces or events have either been added or expanded under Randy’s guidance: events to educate the media, crisis communication plan, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, prepared.dixieepa.com for outage information, a strategic digital advertising plan, virtual annual meeting, general manager’s monthly column to the members in the Today in Mississippi magazine and Cooperative University for the youth leadership program. Dixieepa.com has expanded, including energy calculators, pay online, outage map, etc. Internally, the employee newsletter has increased from four to six editions annually, and all employees receive a weekly e-newsletter. There are video boards in the office lobbies for messaging to members and in the breakrooms and warehouses for the employees.

**\* Measures of Success (20 points) – Please note indicators of the success of the cooperative’s communication/marketing programs during the CEO’s tenure, and on which he or she has had an influence. This criterion is not intended to be an evaluation or showcase of the cooperative’s communication products and services as defined in the larger Spotlight on Excellence awards program. Maximum of 500 words.**

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Randy Smith created a culture where communication is encouraged both internally and externally and studying member needs and expectations has improved. Dixie Electric had little member satisfaction/expectation data until 2016. The cooperative participated in appliance saturation surveys through its generation and transmission cooperative, which included some member satisfaction questions, but the sample sizes were rather low.

After joining in 2016, Dixie Electric participated in Touchstone Energy’s Cooperative Difference Survey for 2017-2018. Two key takeaways from the TSE Cooperative Difference Survey was that Dixie Electric needed to focus more on community engagement and communicating with younger members. To appeal to younger audiences, the communication’s team has strategically increased digital advertising for the cooperative’s app, focused on Instagram and Facebook stories, which appeals to younger audiences, and promoted online voting for the annual meeting. The researched showed that members wanted to see more hands-on community service. As mentioned earlier, Randy and the communications team prepared a formal strategic plan to address this for 2020.

In 2017, Dixie Electric’s wholesale power provider Cooperative Energy sponsored focus groups, comparing responses between white members with minority members and asked Dixie Electric to participate. The objective of the project was to improve advertising reach among diverse groups. Cooperative Energy provides community relations and safety advertising for its member systems. The results showed that minority members were less aware that Dixie Electric is a cooperative, and they are less engaged with cooperative. The focus groups provided practical feedback, suggesting more advertising on traditionally minority radio station. The ad content should center around membership in the cooperative and the cooperatives’ impact in the community. These suggestions have been fully implemented by both Dixie Electric and Cooperative Energy.

In 2019, Dixie Electric coordinated with two neighboring cooperatives to gauge the interest of members for high-speed internet services. NRECA’s research team conducted the in-depth survey, which included Dixie Electric’s service area broken into segments and a sample from each area. The results showed that members were interested in high-speed internet, and the data was entered into feasibility studies. DE Fastlink, Dixie Electric’s high-speed internet subsidiary, was incorporated in August 2020.

Although, a formal employee survey has not been done, management asks for feedback from those attending the annual employee orientation and all-employee meeting. The orientation scored excellent, and the employees expressed appreciation that Randy attends in its entirety. The all-employee meeting received high marks, rating their time spent as “worthwhile.” The employees also provided suggestions for future meetings.

Since 2011, the communication team has received recognition for planning and implementing effective public relations campaigns, crisis communication, media relations and educational events. They received six awards in NRECA’s Spotlight on Excellence program, five awards in the Public Relations Association of Mississippi (PRAM) PRism awards program, and nine Spark awards in the local chapter competition.

Recently, Dixie Electric was honored by PRAM with a top-Spark award and an Award of Excellence in the PRism program for its communication plan to increase participation in the 2019 annual meeting.

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## **Attach a File**

randy\_smith\_dixieelectric\_2020.pdf