



NRECA Awards (2021-2022)

2022 J.C. Brown Nomination Form (Chapter: J.C. Brown CEO Communication Leadership Award)



RQKAQNlr

MButts

Entry details

Your Name	Makenzy Butts
Your Job Title	Business & Communications Administrative Assistant
Electric Cooperative	Middle Tennessee Electric Membership Corporation
City	Murfreesboro
State	TN
Phone Number	+16154450681
Email Address	makenzy.butts@mtemc.com
Preferred Method of Communication	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Phone <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Email
I have read the eligibility requirements found in the Call for Entries and confirm my nominee is eligible for the award.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
I have paid for feedback on my entry	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Name of Nominee	Chris Jones
Job Title	President and CEO
Electric Cooperative	Middle Tennessee Electric Membership Corporation

When did the nominee become CEO/GM at this electric cooperative? | 2013

Has the nominee served as CEO or General Manager at another co-op previously? | No

Provide a brief description of your professional relationship with the nominee.

| I am new to the cooperative (3 months), but Chris has made me feel very welcome from the start. He is my boss' supervisor.

The Cooperative Difference (35 points):

In what ways does the nominee's commitment to communication, both internal and external, help advance the seven cooperative principles, philosophy and way of doing business?

When Middle Tennessee Electric (MTE) employees or members of the community hear the name Chris Jones, they think about a driven leader, thoughtful human being and powerful communicator. Prior to advancing to his current role as President/CEO, he served as Vice President of Communications and Member Services for eleven years and began his career at MTE as a Communications Coordinator. Chris is one of few cooperative leaders in the country with a background so deeply rooted in communications, and he possesses an inherent understanding of the importance of clear, frequent communication with MTE's members, staff and stakeholders.

As the face of the organization, Chris integrates the advancement of the seven cooperative principles into his daily activities. Concern for community and doing what's best for members is at the forefront of any decision Chris makes on behalf of MTE. Early in his tenure, he re-branded and heavily promoted MTE's charitable foundation, SharingChange. By pushing for consistent communication efforts around the program, Chris has helped facilitate the distribution of over \$10 million in grants to 500+ charitable organizations within MTE's service area.

In 2018, Chris championed MTE's acquisition of United Communications, a leader in broadband and fiber. Through the creation of Project UNITE, a joint effort between MTE and United, the goal is to make fiber and high-speed internet available to unserved and underserved areas. Through internal and external communication efforts, Chris has prioritized providing both employees and members with updates about the progress of Project UNITE.

This acquisition was followed in July of 2020 by the coming together of Middle Tennessee Electric and Murfreesboro Electric Department, establishing MTE as the second-largest electric cooperative in the country. Again, Chris paved the way for a smooth transition by being transparent and establishing effective methods of communication with employees of both companies, former MED customers and current MTE members, City of Murfreesboro leadership and community stakeholders. This merger promoted MTE's autonomy and independence while advocating for and promoting cooperative business practices and values.

Whether it's sending crews to assist after hurricanes or sharing ideas, cooperation among cooperatives is important to Chris. He's established MTE as a leader within the Central District Managers Association Advertising Committee. Upon his conclusion as committee chair, Chris encouraged other employees to step into the role. The committee pools its resources from participating cooperatives and municipal electric distribution systems to produce high-quality commercials and place the advertising regionally.

To promote democratic member control while keeping members safe during COVID-19, MTE held its Annual Meeting virtually in 2020 and 2021. Chris is a strong advocate for encouraging member participation through various communication channels. Annual Meetings are built around the Q & A session as members interact with Chris directly. His devotion to MTE's community activities is unmatched; he is happiest when he is talking with the members at the many events we sponsor or support.

Chris Jones is a leader that employees support and members trust because he lives the cooperative principles daily; his communication skills genuinely reflect this.

Strategic Approach (25 points) In what ways does the nominee integrate communication into the organization's strategic planning and management processes?

In addition to playing a role in all forms of communication, Chris consistently integrates communication strategy and the communications team into the organization's strategic planning and management processes. He believes any type of messaging that faces members or employees on behalf of the organization should be filtered through the communications department first to maintain consistency, high-quality final products and a clear message.

When he first stepped into the role of MTE President and CEO in 2013, Chris established a clear organizational purpose, mission, and vision. Conveying these ideas to a large team can be challenging, but Chris was able to unify the MTE team and encourage each employee to strive to meet these goals. He also made Patrick Lencioni's 'Ideal Team Player' an essential read for all employees and has instilled its virtues – that each team member should be humble, hungry and smart – into the company culture at MTE.

At the start of his tenure, MTE didn't have a strategy map to align the priorities of the organization. He worked with MTE's Strategy Team to create the 'Strategic Compass,' a visual representation of MTE's purpose, mission, team, member touchpoints, tactics and external perception and how these areas work together to advance the co-op in its overarching goal of exemplary member satisfaction.

In addition to an in-depth senior leadership team meeting held each month after the Board Meeting, Chris leads SLT on a briefing call at the start of each week to make sure all departments are aligned and up to speed. He maintains strategic cohesiveness through a strategic table set guide for the leadership team which reiterates MTE's purpose, vision, mission and organizational core values – many times read aloud by various team members prior to the start of the agenda. Chris concludes many meetings by establishing clear parameters and directions around who communicates what, when it should be communicated and who has ownership of that communication - whether it be the communications team, the HR department, etc. Having someone lead the team with this level of clarity surrounding all aspects of communication makes everything work more efficiently.

Chris supports all aspects of communication and looks at each situation and opportunity with an initial focus on what the right thing to do for the cooperative and the members is, immediately followed by a secondary focus on how to best communicate it. This has resulted in the adoption of a strategic communication plan that is focused on our core tenet of "Making life better for our members." All communications are formulated to drive this message, along with our mission. Our members know MTE has their best interests at heart, and this is because of Chris Jones' dedication to consistently underscoring this message in all communications. This strategic plan is constantly reviewed and updated quarterly in conjunction with our ACSI member satisfaction scores. The communications department and communications plan is assigned a dedicated budget appropriately set to support growth and provide resources and equipment needed to facilitate initiatives.

Integrated Approach (20 points)

In what ways does the CEO demonstrate support for the cooperative's communication staff?

As a seasoned communications professional himself and the recipient of a bachelor's degree in communications, Chris completely understands the essential role communication plays in building trust with members and employees and is fully supportive of the communications staff. He understands that the MTE brand is dependent upon the interactions members have with MTE employees and rightfully states, as a service organization, our employees ARE our brand.

COVID-19 created countless challenges for members, employees, the organization and cooperatives. Chris quickly rose to the occasion to not only meet those challenges but to establish practices that could benefit our members and employees in the long run. He had to adapt to the unique needs of managing a workforce spread across 7 offices while employees worked from home. To keep dialogue open, Chris started hosting a monthly 'Town Hall' webinar at the onset of the pandemic to discuss topics important to employees and the organization. These Town Halls are still taking place, and employees are asked to submit questions they have for Chris to answer during the live webinar. He also makes it a point to frequently encourage employees to reach out to him personally at any time if they have concerns or comments.

Employees from all departments, particularly those in member-facing roles, are kept informed of important updates and priorities at MTE. The Wire, MTE's internal website, is constantly updated with any important changes or news. Chris

frequently monitors MTE social media accounts and reports any member concerns to the communications team to ensure they are taken care of.

On top of his plethora of duties and responsibilities, Chris still makes the time to write a weekly 'Small Talk' message on a variety of topics to keep employees informed. It is published on MTE's internal website and distributed company-wide via email. He also writes a monthly column to members in the Tennessee Magazine and a quarterly letter to MTE retirees.

An experienced Communications and Marketing Consultant was hired to spearhead strategy and work as a liaison to coordinate efforts between the MTE communications department and Barker & Christol, a local advertising agency that assists with various publications, social media and advertising strategies. Similarly, Chris supported integrating McNeely Brockman Public Relations into the communications strategy to assist with public relations initiatives. With Chris at the helm, the communications department has steadily grown and evolved to meet the needs of the organization. From graphic design to public relations and communications coordination, the team has expanded to include individuals with a broad range of skills and talents.

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.

The past few years have been full of challenges for MTE, including a major tornado in our service area, a catastrophic ice storm, the coming together with MED and a subsequent comprehensive brand refresh, and the continued impact of COVID-19. MTE's emergence on the other side of these challenges having upheld its overwhelmingly positive reputation in the communities it serves speaks a great deal to Chris' level of commitment to members, the organization, and rich, robust communication efforts.

When discussing the recent one-year anniversary of MTE and MED joining forces, City of Murfreesboro Mayor Shane McFarland stated, "I was comfortable about the merger with Chris Jones leading the helm of two strong electric providers coming together. The first year is fulfilling the vision of how the agreement would benefit the citizens of Murfreesboro." The success of this complex transaction can be directly attributed to Chris's communication and leadership styles – his patience, honesty, integrity and humility are an incredible asset to MTE.

From a data-driven perspective, MTE currently holds an ACSI of 86, which is far higher than the industry baseline of 73. The organization has consistently maintained a high ACSI score throughout Chris' tenure.

He is as comfortable in front of a news camera or city council as he is discussing a problem one on one with a single member or a benefits issue with an individual employee. Chris has been known to quietly meet individually with members who have been negatively impacted in some way to make sure they know they are valued and are being heard. In fact, when members of a very small area of our service territory were without power for a period of time, Chris took it upon himself to knock on doors, deliver letters of apology and check the status of impacted members. It is these thoughtful, personal acts of communication and goodwill that set Chris apart from other cooperative leaders and positively impact member attitudes toward the cooperative.

In a similar vein, when tornado recovery efforts were underway to restore power to more than 34,000 members after the March 2020 tornado, Chris Jones filmed daily, sometimes hourly, videos for social media to keep members fully informed. At his encouragement, MTE team members from all departments knocked on doors to make sure members were safe and see if they needed any assistance while their power was out. To commemorate the extraordinary challenge and recovery efforts, a book was compiled to serve as a pictorial and written history of MTE's efforts. Despite this difficulty for the community, Chris' commitment to members and initiative to establish open communication left a lasting impact in their minds.

With a servant's heart and the skills of a great communicator, Chris Jones has paved the way for MTE's growth and continued success in the community and in the cooperative industry overall, and there is no doubt he will continue to do so.

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PDF
Type of attachment Other
Small Talk - Janu... 54 KiB

MP4
Type of attachment Other
Team MTE Town... 294.1 MiB

PDF
Type of attachment Other
2020 Wilson Cou... 5.3 MiB

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