

# 2018 J.C. Brown CEO Communication Leader

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Name \*

Patrick  
O'Loughlin

Electric Cooperative \*

Ohio's  
Electric  
Cooperatives

When did the nominee become CEO of this cooperative?

2015

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

No

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**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? \***

Patrick O’Loughlin’s commitment to communication promotes the seven cooperative principles via enhanced efforts that have flourished since his July 2015 appointment as CEO of Ohio’s Electric Cooperatives (OEC). Patrick’s first initiative was to hire a vice president of statewide services, charged with enriching the organization’s communications programs. With the objective of advancing the both cooperative tenets and the cooperative difference, a strategic plan was enacted, which elevated the principles and proliferated the not-for-profit cooperative business model.

**Voluntary and open membership:** all communications efforts are specifically crafted with the goal of promoting the benefits of cooperative membership, including the programs and services that offer support to the network’s 1 million members.

**Democratic member control:** OEC communications initiatives are fortified by the philosophical foundation that cooperatives are democratically governed organizations, with elected representatives who serve fellow owners in a member-led, collaborative system that’s strategically aligned with members’ best interests. Ohio was recently recognized as the state with the most ACRE presidents’ club members (140), and the state with the largest overall ACRE representation. It also enjoys 100 percent ACRE participation among co-op directors. The statewide association was recognized by NRECA as “5-Star Co-op” for its efforts in NRECA’s “Co-ops Vote” campaign; the above-noted efforts are result of Patrick’s directive to underscore communications endeavors via the seven cooperative principles.

**Members’ economic participation:** disbursement of capital credits, including the nature of the program and its integration to the fabric of the cooperative business model, are routinely noted in the pages of the various editions of Ohio Cooperative Living, the publication that serves Ohio’s electric cooperative network. Because of Patrick’s charge to regularly communicate the accomplishments of Ohio’s cooperative network, Dayton Daily News published a story about a member cooperative’s 2016 capital credit retirements. The statewide association is currently producing a web-based video that explains the origins and benefits of the capital credits program.

**Autonomy and independence:** communication is rooted in the premise that, while Ohio’s 24 cooperatives are individual, self-governing entities, they’re part of a supportive, collaborative network. OEC’s flexibly supports each of its cooperatives’ individual needs, while unifying and leading the co-ops on major issues.

**Education, training, and information:** OEC’s robust training program was attended by 1600+ co-op employees in FY 16-17, with the objective of helping member cooperatives engage and educate their own members.

**Cooperation among cooperatives:** Ohio’s electric cooperatives mobilized 72 linemen, who traveled to Georgia to help their sister cooperatives restore power in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma. OEC’s communications efforts resulted in coverage by two local broadcast stations, for a total of four stories. OEC also received coverage from local stations for its 2016 trip to Guatemala, in coordination with NRECA International, and for its 2017 opening of an indoor linemen training facility.

**Concern for community:** at Patrick’s initiative, the organization formed the “Community Foundation of Ohio’s Electric Cooperatives,” funded by staff contributions and fundraising efforts. The entity made contributions to hurricanes Harvey and Irma relief, and the Worthington (Ohio) Resource Pantry, which provides support for struggling families.

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

In 2015, at Patrick’s direction, OEC undertook a two-day strategic communications planning session, which resulted in a three-year strategic communications plan, including the creation of the Ohio’s Electric Cooperatives brand. All senior OEC staffers attended, along with OEC communications and member services staff and key co-op communicators and CEOs from around the state. The plan is evaluated on a semiannual basis, with the help of co-op communicators and CEOs, who participate in our Strategic Communications Advisory Committee. The plan integrates communication with Ohio’s Electric Cooperatives’ strategic planning and management processes via:

Ohio Cooperative Living (OCL) magazine: dramatically redesigned and renamed in March 2017, OCL is OEC’s premier publication, strengthened by an editorial schedule—reviewed monthly—that touches on current industry issues, as well as consistent industry themes. Patrick’s regular column includes planned editorial coverage of cooperative themes, but retains the flexibility necessary to inject breaking news commentary. The magazine was revised based on feedback from extensive statewide reader and co-op staff focus groups, and incorporates high-quality paper; enhanced graphic design; high-resolution photography; lower overall printing costs; and industry updates, supplemented by member-recommended features.

social media: OEC posts co-op news and information an average of 30 times per week, on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, and [www.ohioec.org](http://www.ohioec.org). OEC and its member co-ops partner with ARCMedia to ensure that posts are frequent, current, insightful, and member-relevant. To encourage participation and boost co-ops’ member engagement efforts, OEC underwrote the cost of the co-ops’ initial 12-month engagement with ARCMedia. As of September 2017, Ohio electric cooperatives’ comprehensive Facebook fan base has surged to just under 35,000, an increase of approximately 16% since January 2017.

Strategic communications plans and audits: in 2017 alone, six member co-ops have requested assistance with formulating strategic communications plans. OEC staff also visited several co-ops to conduct audits of internal communication efforts. Results include member acceptance of an impending and potentially controversial rate increase; the formation of an employee “voice of the co-op” council, in which staff discuss and address communication issues; the realignment of human resources to improve communication challenges; healthier employee engagement; revised safety procedures; and enriched interpersonal communication endeavors.

Instatement of professional communication staff, as well as repositioning of existing staff. Hires include a director of communications and member services; magazine managing editor; magazine associate editor; magazine graphic designer; and a communications intern. New staff are seasoned professionals from an array of industries and with disciplinary depth and breadth; tenured employees were given responsibilities or promotions reflective of their contributions and skills. The result has been a collaborative, cohesive communications department, whose reach extends well beyond the parameters of traditional (monthly member publication) vehicles.

Patrick has introduced quarterly all-staff meetings to provide updates on a variety of topics, such as business initiatives, safety, and employment benefits. Staff are encouraged to ask questions, or, if they’re not comfortable doing so, to submit written queries prior to the gatherings, which may remain anonymous. Transparency is the consistent theme, and no topics are off-limits.

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

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Patrick’s support of the statewide communications staff manifests itself in several ways:

Communications staff has a “seat at the table” to tell the cooperative difference story, and has done so successfully. Communications staff is either present at meetings, or immediately advised, of impending issues or initiatives that require specialized, targeted, or mass communication, and the department’s accomplishments are frequently presented to statewide managers and co-op communicators, with the objective to provide occupational training and impart best practices.

Since he began his tenure in July 2015, Patrick has charged the communications department with reinventing itself. Patrick’s first move to overhaul the OEC communications department was to hire a vice president of statewide services, who was charged with enriching the organization’s communications programs. Prior to Patrick’s leadership, the communications department’s primary output was a monthly consumer magazine and a weekly OEC employee and member co-op newsletter. In the ensuing two years, existing employees have been realigned, and new hires with specialized public relations, media relations, corporate communications, journalism, and graphic design experience have been prioritized. The “Country Living” department - a moniker relegated to the department because of its chief, and largely sole, communications effort – became a valid, comprehensive communications and member services department, chiefly due to the reorganization of staff and the broad expansion of services. Because Patrick made communications a priority, the OEC board overwhelmingly approved budget increases to accommodate new services for OEC and its member co-ops, including video production; strategic communications planning; communications audits; enhanced social media support via a partnership with co-op-affiliated ARCMedia; and improved paper and a redesign of the consumer magazine, as well as a statewide reader focus group initiative.

Patrick has set a high bar for training and education. The expectation is that the OEC communications staff will not only seek and avail themselves of educational opportunities, but that they will convey their knowledge to the communicators across the statewide network. Conversely, the communications staff solicits input from the distribution co-op communicators, in an effort to disseminate individual co-op experiences and practices throughout the system.

Biannually, the OEC staff holds a strategic communications and marketing committee meeting, made up of a cross-section of OEC staff, co-op general managers, and co-op communications staff, to discuss and update the statewide association’s communications plan and endeavors. Additionally, the statewide marketing, member services, and communications association meets twice yearly to formulate strategy, assess ongoing efforts, and to recommend enhancements for the three disciplines. Finally, upon realization that communications staff at the distribution co-op level were bereft of a venue that focused solely on their efforts, the statewide communications department developed a two-day communicators’ conference, driven by professionals from across the system, who author the agenda, exchange best practices, and avail themselves of each other’s communications successes and “lesson learned.” The initial conference proved immensely beneficial, and will become an annual offering.

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**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. \***

The success of Ohio’s Electric Cooperatives’ communications agenda is measured by:

Increase in social media followers: since March 2017, engagements on OEC’s Facebook account have increased more than 250%, and published content more than 80%. Accordingly, impressions are up 50%, and its fan base has increased 10%.

Across the statewide system, participating Ohio cooperatives (19 of 24) have seen 177% increase in Facebook audience engagement; 174% increase in page impressions; 138% increase in published content; and 31% increase in page fans.

Earned media has increased dramatically, based largely on Patrick’s encouragement to relay the “cooperative difference” story in as many venues as possible. Feature stories of Ohio’s Electric Cooperatives’ efforts air consistently across the state—in one instance, nationally—and most notably in the central Ohio area, in both newspapers and on television. Stories covered in the past year include Hurricane Irma mutual aid; capital credits; impact of the solar eclipse; community solar arrays; load control; opening of the Central Ohio Linemen Training (COLT) facility; power plant safety milestones; letters to the editor; “co-op 101”; legislative advocacy efforts; Ohio’s fallen linemen license plate; OEC staff community philanthropic efforts; and a business profile of Patrick O’Loughlin, in outlets such as The Columbus Dispatch; Dayton Daily News; Wheeling News-Intelligencer; Columbus Business First; RE Magazine; Columbus CEO Magazine; Our Ohio Magazine; Platt’s Megawatt Daily; WBNS-10TV; WSYX/ABC 6; WTTE Fox 28; 610 WTVN-FM; and national cable outlet RFD-TV.

Requests by distribution cooperatives for communications project partnerships from the OEC communications staff has elevated considerably under Patrick’s leadership, and via the directive of the vice president of statewide services. In addition to the previously stated strategic communications plans and audits, notable endeavors that historically were not requested by distribution co-ops, but which have grown to be part of the statewide communications department’s docket, include:

- video voice-overs
- writing a general manager’s annual meeting speech
- providing input for the recruitment of co-op communications staff
- posting career opportunities for the replacement of a retiring general manager
- chronicling co-op history
- rate increase outreach
- general member communications efforts
- co-writing an economic development letter intended for U.S. Vice President Mike Pence
- coordinating OEC’s two annual member conferences
- statewide association building remodeling input and coordination
- individual communications “toolkits” on phone scams, service franchise agreements, load control, community solar, and crisis communications (training and plans)
- the production of both an annual report and a “year in review” booklet
- communications presentations at industry and internal (OEC)-based events.

Since the revision of the organization's monthly distribution cooperative and statewide association publication, the magazine has consistently exceeded its paid advertisement budget, and, in at least one instance, turned down revenue because the magazine had surpassed its advertisement page quota.

In conclusion, Patrick has fostered and cultivated an environment of inclusive, comprehensive, proactive communications and communications training, which has resulted in communications being as ingrained to OEC's operations as power generation, government relations, and safety. Thanks to Patrick O'Loughlin's leadership and initiative, the OEC communications department has become an innovator and leader of best practices among industry professionals.

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