



**NRECA Awards (2022-2023)**

2023 LaBerge Nomination Cycle (Chapter: LaBerge Award for Excellence in Strategic Communication)



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# Kristie Aldridge, CCC

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## Entry details

Your Name	Nelle Hotchkiss
Your Job Title	SVP & COO, Association Services
Your Electric Cooperative	North Carolina's Electric Cooperatives
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I have paid for feedback on my entry.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Name of Nominee	Kristie Aldridge, CCC
Job Title	Vice President of Strategic Communications & Marketing

How long has your nominee been at their current cooperative?

16 years

How long has your nominee been in the NRECA co-op network?

16 years

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

As COO, I am Kristie's supervisor, although I have enjoyed working with Kristie and watching her career develop since she was first introduced to our statewide organization through an internship.

## Cooperation Among Cooperatives (20 points)

How has the nominee lived out the cooperative principle of “Cooperation Among Cooperatives” through service to a wider co-op audience?

Kristie Aldridge is the Vice President of Strategic Communications & Marketing for North Carolina’s Electric Cooperatives, our statewide association and G&T, and it is my pleasure to nominate her for the LaBerge Award. Throughout her career and regardless of her role, Kristie has played an integral part in crafting and executing communications strategies on behalf of and in collaboration with our 26 member cooperatives. She has become a communications leader during a critical time of transition for our industry, and in doing so has helped make our state’s co-ops national leaders in the pursuit of forward-thinking, innovative and consumer-centric solutions in a rapidly evolving energy landscape. She truly embodies the co-op difference in all she does.

Kristie’s standard of excellence permeates the work of her team and inspires those from our member co-ops working with her. In recent years she applied her attention to detail to a rebranding of our statewide organizations to North Carolina’s Electric Cooperatives. Through the process, Kristie helped create and implement a plan to educate internal staff about the strategy behind the shift while ensuring all collateral reflected new brand standards.

Kristie was integral in formulating what has become a statewide Brighter Future initiative – an alignment of future planning across our 26 member cooperatives that includes a focus on reliability and innovation; affordable, sustainable energy, including a goal to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050; and local community support. Innovative work was being done across the state, which Kristie witnessed firsthand through her leadership of an Energy Services Group, made up of representatives from each NC co-op. Yet there wasn’t a clear means to organize all of these efforts, which included microgrid deployment, EV infrastructure and new solar resources. Through Kristie’s leadership, the Brighter Future initiative emerged — not as an operational framework, but as a communications framework that served to both unify our member co-ops’ missions and effectively educate consumers about often technical concepts. The results have been groundbreaking, with new technologies and energy services falling neatly into defined categories that propel the Brighter Future narrative.

Kristie is a skilled tactician and is quick to pivot to assisting co-ops in need. During hurricanes and other events that received national media attention, Kristie has supported cooperatives statewide through comprehensive communications that included everything from public and media relations to social media and advertising. During an outage along the Outer Banks — during peak tourist season — due to a severed submerged transmission cable, Kristie traveled to assist the local co-op onsite, helping their limited staff manage media inquiries and social media channels.

On the national level, Kristie is a member of the G&T Communicators Association and has served on the Touchstone Energy Regional Members Group. She helped host representatives from VMDAEC, Oregon Rural Electric Association, Touchstone Energy and NRECA in discussions about evolving communications strategies. During Curtis Wynn’s tenure as president of NRECA, she assisted in establishing his platform and related messaging, and, as discussed below, has furthered his devotion to promoting diversity, equity and inclusion throughout the co-op network.

## Education, Training and Information (20 points)

How has the nominee demonstrated personal excellence delivering education, training and information? What are specific examples of demonstrated excellence in the roles of Technician, Artist, and Listener?

Kristie has earned and maintains her CCC designation, and has supported other employees and co-op communicators in pursuing it. She is a skilled presenter and has developed a casual through informed and authoritative presentation style. Her wide-ranging list of presentations and topics includes a presentation on implementing a balanced scorecard performance management tool — which can shape co-op strategy and lead to tangible increases in member satisfaction scores — to fellow G&T Communicators, as well as for NC cooperative leaders; and multiple presentations to our statewide board of directors on business and communications strategy, crisis communications, emerging technology and data trends impacting co-op communications.

She has also presented during CONNECT 2021, deftly interviewing North Carolina's Electric Cooperatives CEO Joe Brannan to guide a conversation about emerging technologies in a way that resonated with communicators, as well as at CONNECT 2019, presenting on targeted digital advertising with Touchstone Energy's Mary Ann Cristiano and Middle Tennessee Electric's Brad Gibson.

Kristie guides and contributes to the agenda for The Exchange, an annual meeting of NC co-op communicators. Upon taking leadership of the Cooperative Insights team, which conducts survey research for co-ops across the country including the annual National Survey on the Cooperative Difference, Kristie has overseen the highly regarded Member Engagement Summit. At the 2021 event, Kristie moderated a panel discussion on diversity, equity and inclusion— discussing the concepts as complementary to the co-op business model and critical as a business function — which directly inspired the recent recipient of the Curtis Wynn Diversity Champion Award.

## **“Always On” Approach (60 points)**

How has the nominee embodied the principles of the “Always On” Communication model to advance strategic electric co-op communication? What are specific examples of demonstrated excellence in the roles of Advocate, Manager and Innovator? Please address each of the following areas and provide specific examples and measures of success to demonstrate how communication plan(s) developed, directed and implemented by the nominee have helped to “storm harden” co-op communications.

Communication as an integral part of the co-op's strategic plan, not just a support function of that plan. (15 points)

Kristie has an inherent business sense, and throughout her career she has leveraged it to make the connection between communications and operational success, both through her work with communicators and co-op leadership. Through work with the Brighter Future initiative, Kristie has helped solidify the concept that the future success of electric utilities is wholly dependent on effective communications. Kristie works closely with the statewide executive team, championing co-op communications and practitioners, and as a result communications is regularly cited by co-op leadership as an integral part of strategic planning.

A critical component of Kristie's work involves a feedback loop of data-driven decision making, informed by the survey research team under her leadership. Kristie has used data to guide the direction of communications plans including the Brighter Future initiative, digital and print advertising, and the Connect to Save demand response program — using member segmentation and meter data analysis to identify and target those most likely to participate in the program, as well as those who would have the largest impact in reducing peak demand through smart thermostat events.

Her work has also supported NC co-ops in communicating the value of cooperative membership. She recently developed a communications plan for rising costs based on emerging needs in 2022. The plan provides turnkey materials to help consumers understand the functional value that cooperatives provide, as well as their focus on keeping costs low. In rolling out the plan, Kristie presented the concepts strategy to both our statewide board of directors and co-op communicators.

Member engagement to build loyalty and grassroots political strength. (15 points)

Kristie's work fostering member engagement spans both statewide and co-op initiatives. She is a partner to our Government Affairs team in leveraging paid, earned and owned media channels to raise awareness among policymakers of issues important to electric cooperatives and their members. She is often instrumental in crafting talking points specific to legislative matters affecting co-ops and the North Carolina energy landscape. She has also supported the Co-ops Vote initiative, working with Government Affairs staff to develop messaging and collateral.

Kristie understands the importance of member satisfaction to the success of the co-op business model, and she supports co-ops in establishing a strong foundation of understanding and engagement. She oversees the team responsible for statewide community programs, including Bright Ideas education grants and co-op involvement with the NC Kenan Fellows program – placing teachers with co-ops for hands-on utility experience that is relayed to the classroom. In fostering awareness of these

programs in unique ways, including partnerships with universities including UNC and NC State, she is developing a well of goodwill that is crucial to build brand loyalty and grassroots support.

She played an instrumental role in deploying a Reputation Management Guide developing key messages on critical issues from board governance and capital credits, to transparency and executive compensation.

Working with member advisors, she led a home solar messaging campaign, utilizing Carolina Country, social, newsletter articles, bill inserts, cover wraps and more, highlighting member engagement within our Brighter Future vision — supporting co-ops in finding solutions for members and avoiding government mandates.

Use of multiple communication channels and platforms to meet members where they are. (15 points)

During a recent statewide board meeting, Kristie explained how a cross-platform communications strategy will help messaging have a greater impact in 2023. The plan addresses a series of themes over each quarter, utilizing all channels under her guidance: owned media via Carolina Country magazine; paid advertising across digital, social, streaming and print tactics; and public relations including traditional and social media. The integrated strategy will reach target audiences on a variety of platforms, each reinforcing the other through consistency and strategic timing to increase relevance.

Kristie has worked with her fellow statewide and co-op communicators to achieve this communications hat trick in the past, to great effect: in 2020 and 2021, communications promoting electric vehicles and a growing co-op facilitated charging network spanned channels including digital; advertising, print advertising, Carolina Country articles and EV microsites branded for each local co-op. In 2022, 9% of NC co-op members (via a Carolina Country reader survey) reported an interest in choosing a hybrid or EV in the next year, versus the national average of 6.6%.

The methodology was replicated in 2022 in messaging related to residential rooftop solar, positioning co-ops as a critical partner for members in making informed energy decisions. Kristie developed an integrated strategy to target members through earned, paid and owned strategies, with digital assets serving to more surgically target interested members and strategically amplify impact.

Positioning of the co-op as a trustworthy source of information on complex and dynamic energy issues. (15 points)

In 2017, Kristie spearheaded a campaign to help NC electric co-ops engage members with the innovative tools and services offered by their cooperatives as the industry transitions. This was the start of what became the communications framework for the Brighter Future initiative, positions each local electric co-op as a resource and partner to its members. The campaign has grown over the years, and while the topics have evolved — integrating concepts including demand response, grid management and distributed energy resources — driving engagement to help members achieve better energy management has remained a key theme.

Through Kristie's work with co-op leadership, a dedication to forthrightness has become the standard. North Carolina's electric co-ops are getting ahead of technology discussions and leading the message with both members and policymakers.

But perhaps one of the most long-lasting contributions Kristie has made in this area, is her work in developing the perspective that member engagement throughout the energy transition is key, yielding benefits to co-ops as well as their members.

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Kristie Aldridge L... 4.8 MiB