

2019 LaBerge Award

#31

Information

About

Nominator

Name * Rachel Frey

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Information

About

Nominee

Name * Keith Stapleton

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Job Title * Chief Communication Office

Business 

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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 (statewide, regional and/or national level)? *

Keith Stapleton is the embodiment of the cooperative principle of Cooperation Among Cooperatives, and throughout his career he has assisted cooperatives at a regional, statewide and even a national perspective.

Among east Texas cooperatives, he frequently acts as a leader in crafting messaging for the region. While his own Cooperative was responding to unfounded media scrutiny following high winter bills, he took the time to listen and advise other cooperatives who were facing similar challenges. He provided good counsel and an open mind, while listening to their specific situation and challenges. Keith also shared his co-op’s response and research with the other cooperatives to help them build their own timely response.

However, this was not an isolated instance. He has led a wide range of communication and legislative efforts regarding deregulation of the Texas market, transmission line legislation, and countless other efforts at the state and national level. He has provided guidance to cooperatives facing a wide variety of crises and challenges, all the while leading his communications and member services departments at Sam Houston Electric Cooperative.

As a former member of the Council of Rural Electric Communicators, he fostered positive relationships among communicators and leaders around the nation. He also led Council efforts to craft strategic communication guides that are available to help every co-op communicator.

He has even worked to prepare future generations of communicators while serving as a mentor and host of the New Co-op Communicator Orientation in Washington, D.C.

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? *

Keith Stapleton is a dedicated supporter in delivering and shaping education, training and information. A lifelong learner, he is a graduate of National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's Robert I. Kabat Management Internship Program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

As he constantly seeks out learning opportunities, he also encourages his employees and coworkers to continue their education through avenues such as the CONNECT conference and in pursuing their Certified Cooperative Communicator designation.

He continuously exhibits each of the roles of a communicator. In the technician aspect of communication, he regularly creates presentations for his Cooperative's Board of Directors. He also has played a key role in facilitating the recent strategic planning sessions for the Cooperative. Furthermore, he inputs and writes the messages that Sam Houston EC member-consumers receive through their online account or mobile application.

As an artist, he crafts Spotlight award-winning feature stories and columns. He has recently won a silver award for Best Column in 2016, and is a past American Marketing Association-Houston Crystal Award Winner. Keith also created content that won two Edgar F. Chestnutt awards. The first was in 2005, for the "Neon Leon & Lightnin' Liz Safety Education Campaign." This education campaign featured two cartoons promoting electrical safety. The second was in 2009, for the Cooperative's Hurricane Ike Crisis Communication Plan. Keith led communications efforts following a major hurricane that left the Cooperative's entire service area in complete disrepair. None of the more than 66,000 meters were receiving electricity.

Perhaps Keith's strongest role is that of a listener. He is a sought-after panel moderator, and has been featured at countless NRECA Annual Meetings, Regional Meetings and CONNECT conferences. His ability to prepare for a discussion, and guide the conversation so that audience members are able to glean useful information that they can implement at their cooperatives.

He also gathers information for industry research. His MIP project included interviewing Cooperative leaders across the nation to see how communicators can help their leaders become more successful. He was able to translate this research into his “How to Read Your Boss’ Mind” presentation, which he was asked to give at the Minnesota Rural Electric Association’s Member Services Conference in 2014.

Communication as an integral part of the co-op’s strategic plan, not just a support function of that plan. *

Keith has been a staunch advocate of the creation and maintenance of the Cooperative’s strategic plan. He helped drive the most recent strategic planning sessions during the summer of 2018.

During the planning sessions, he ensured that each strategic initiative—from reliability improvements to financial security— included a communication aspect for members and employees. This year, his communication department is providing updates on each initiative to employees and members.

He helped craft strategic goals for member communication and satisfaction. The Cooperative is experiencing high growth in a select area of the service territory. He built an initiative to ensure the newest members receive the same high-quality service as existing members. This will be measured by a new member survey he designed.

Another goal encourages superior service for all members. Keith helped decide that this will be measured through traditional American Customer Satisfaction Index scores. It will also be measured by the call center achieving a 94 percent answer rate for all calls, and by the communications department increasing utilization of the Co-op’s online member portal and mobile app by eight percent each. These goals support one another. By driving more transactions online, it reduces the number of calls to the office. Fewer calls yield not only a higher answer rate, but an increased quality of call. The representatives can feel empowered to spend more time with each member. By crafting strategic goals that support a common mission, Keith is also creating a positive culture change in the Cooperative.

Member engagement to build loyalty and grassroots political strength. *

Keith has advocated for electric cooperatives at a local, statewide and national level. He has built respectful working relationships with community leaders and legislators by providing clear, honest

information, and by responding to any inquiry promptly.

However, the backbone of these relationships is driven by Sam Houston EC's reputation and member engagement. In 2018, the Cooperative needed to implement a revised rate structure. Keith took the data from our consultants, and met with member advisory groups across our 10-county service area.

After hearing the details from Keith, members overwhelmingly chose the highest increase option of \$7 to the base charge, and the Cooperative's Board of Directors implement this option. Any rate increase can yield negative attention, but through careful, deliberate communication led by Keith, the Cooperative actually saw an increase in its ACSI score to 89 in the quarter following the revised rate implementation.

The restructure's announcement to members occurred in Texas Co-op Power magazine. The public notice written by the Cooperative's lawyers was placed on one page, and on the facing page was a written explanation by Keith in easy-to-understand language that answered a member's most important question- "How will this impact my bill?"

Success was also measured by the number of member calls requesting more information about the restructure. The Department interpreted fewer calls received as increased understanding of the rate. Of the Co-op's 55,000 members, just 105 called regarding the rate restructure in the first four months following the announcement.

Use of multiple communication channels and platforms to meet members on their own turf. *

Keith consistently reviews member communication efforts and their effectiveness for our membership. This has led to the Cooperative implementing a new mobile app to help connect with every generation of member. While our youngest members prefer the app, he ensures that the phrasing and language on each page promotes the cooperative advantage, and Sam Houston EC specifically.

Keith has led an "all of the above" approach to member communication, ensuring that the department utilizes unique communication through the member magazine, print advertisements, radio advertisements, e-newsletter, website, social media accounts, blog and annual communication pieces like the annual report and new member packets. He believes each piece should have a cohesive, yet unique

tone. There's very little content that appears exactly the same in each channel, because the members who choose to use each channel are unique. He has driven efforts to ensure that a magazine article reaches our most traditional members as they feel comfortable, but a Facebook post on the same message will have a unique spin for its unique audience. However, every message is shaped to ensure it has a consistent tone and "voice" from Sam Houston EC.

Positioning of the co-op as a trustworthy source of information on complex and dynamic energy issues. *

Keith is the key to Sam Houston EC's relationship with the community. As stated earlier, he has helped educate members on complicated issues such as rate design, and taken their input back to the Board of Directors and leadership to ensure our members have a say in future actions of the Cooperative.

One of Keith's latest efforts is positioning the Cooperative as our member's trusted source for information on solar panels and other distributed energy resources. He has partnered with our engineering department to develop a unique presentation on solar energy. He is leading the message to members that while the Co-op will support our members whether they decide to install solar panels or not, we would like the members to call us first for information on maintenance and costs that a salesperson may not share.

Keith has been joined by an engineer on several community presentations, which have led to positive conversations about the cooperative and about solar panels in our area. The presentations have also generated positive media coverage for the cooperative, and further establishment of the co-op as a trustworthy source of information.

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