

MORE THAN BITS AND BYTES

PSE keeps focused on strong “real-world” customer relationships

PSE

PUGET SOUND ENERGY

The Energy To Do Great Things

By Bert Valdman, executive vice president and chief operating officer

The energy business has never been more challenging. Utilities must upgrade transmission and distribution infrastructure, produce green energy, drive energy efficiency, and remain in compliance with evolving federal and state standards – all while controlling costs and maintaining reliability. That’s a tall order under any circumstance and even more daunting in a turbulent economy.

The smart grid offers many potential utility solutions to this formidable to-do list. New technologies promise better management of how energy is produced and used, gaining efficiencies that have never been possible before. Utilities, though, face two obstacles in making the most of new technologies – and neither of those obstacles has anything to do with the hardware or software that will be used.

First, data and information come from the same family, but the two aren’t the same. Turning data into actionable information comes with a steep learning curve that will likely mean we have to re-think some of our traditional ways of doing business. Second, and even more critical, we risk losing touch with our customers if we turn them into bits and bytes and forget there are families, homes and communities that depend on the work we do.

As we move to the digital world, we need to stay part of the real world. Puget Sound Energy’s own experience in moving to new technologies has taught us a lot about these issues. Over the last decade, we deployed more than 1.8 million wireless natural gas and electric meters, giving us greater and faster access to data on how our customers use energy. Instead of manually reading these meters every month, we now use a pole-top network to gather the data from the homes and businesses we serve across western Washington.

With a rapidly growing service area, the ability to read the meter remotely is increasingly valuable. Going to wireless data collection allows us to keep closer, more immediate, track of our system and the energy that is being used at a much lower cost, and with greater detail than manual reading allowed. As these first steps lead to a true “smart grid,” there is tremendous potential to benefit the environment through more efficient energy use.



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But what happens to the relationship with our customer? A truck with a utility logo, or a familiar meter reader in uniform, is a tangible reminder we live and work in the neighborhoods we serve. This connection is a powerful force in having our customers know us as more than an energy provider, but as a community ally. As an example, a PSE meter reader once saved an elderly man's life after discovering him alone and disoriented in his rural cabin. The incident earned PSE an award from the U.S. Commission on Aging, and serves as a reminder that we must be creative in building lasting relationships through new technologies. The good news is we can already see progress.



PSE's South Whidbey customer service office



PSE's Vashon Island customer service office

Today's consumer wants transparency, and online tools offer many ways to help them understand the services we deliver and the choices they have. Online energy audits that employ the data gathered by our wireless meter-reading network have become very popular with our customers. In addition, we're using the data to communicate more quickly during storms through a new online outage map. Consumers now demand better and localized information, and the smart grid can help us meet that expectation by offering personalized tools tailored to each user's needs.

But even as PSE goes digital, we are also building new community customer service offices. Some of our customers still appreciate a face-to-face conversation when they pay their bill. But the main role of these community offices is to be our eyes and ears in the community – to work with municipalities on energy efficiency programs, provide information to customers who are interested in energy conservation, offer support and restoration information during major storm-related power outages. We want our customers to know the door is open and we're here to help. For some customers, a Web site is perfect, yet others want to pick up the phone or pull up a chair and chat.

The smart grid won't be a success because of technology, but because of what we do with the information it yields. Keeping our customers front and center will keep us on course as we chart a new future for utilities and the customers and communities we serve.



PSE's Port Townsend customer service office