

A Hot Topic

I am sure you thought that with that headline, I would be talking about climate change in this column, and you probably would not have been surprised if you heard me saying something about how hot it was during the march on Pennsylvania Avenue this past weekend. (It was) But the "hot topic" I want to comment on is you (yes - you) and the industry and community that you are a part of.

Earlier this week I had another opportunity to be in front of an audience comprised of members of the general public, following on the heels of that entire week I recently spent doing that as an expert-in-residence at the University of Colorado, Boulder. I do a lot of public speaking, some of it as a sole speaker, some of it as a panelist, and some of it as a moderator.

But most of it over the years has been talking to all of you, the inside-the-fence members of the electricity community. Increasingly, though, I am being asked to speak before audiences who are not like us but and who have come to an event because of their general interest in what is happening in energy (which for the most part means what is happening with electricity).

This past Monday I facilitated a panel discussion on energy before a general public audience that an event jointly put on by an NPR affiliate station and a major national non-profit organization. I would describe the audience appetite as ravenous judged by the questions they brought up during the 30 minutes of Q&A that took place at the end of the panel sessions. I would say that the attendees were aware that a lot is going on in the energy area but yet not exactly sure what those "things" are and now they fit together. We probably could have taken questions until late in the evening. Oh,

and I should probably mention that there was a charge of \$10 to attend - which I submit as more evidence of the interest level.

So what does this mean to us in the electricity community?

Before answering that, let me try to guess why these audiences are so interested in the topic of energy.

Certainly some of it can be attributed to climate change, and the role that the energy industry plays in carbon-based emissions. When polls show concern about climate change rising almost monthly, and with a recent Yale University survey showing a majority of people in all 435 Congressional Districts being concerned, it should not be surprising that people are paying more attention to what is happening in energy.

Some of it can be seen as the always-present level of concern over energy

prices, and their role as a "pocketbook" issue in a household budget.

And of course there is always the NIMBY segment of interest, which is focused on the local impact of a specific project or facility.

But it is more than any of those. People are starting to realize that something big is going on in the world of electricity. They are seeing headline after headline in the general media about electric vehicles, solar panels, batteries, wind farms and other "new" developments. They are seeing headlines about coal plants shutting down. They are getting a smart meter on their house, and they suddenly have a smart thermostat on their wall.

For some time, there has been a saying within our industry that all the really customer wants is to be able to flip a switch and have the lights come on. I believe that idea is for the most part still true. We have to remember that as the

grid gets smarter, and as the system begins to rely more and more on the customer-side of the meter, that must not mean that the customer's experience gets any more complicated. But that should not be interpreted as a lack of interest by people in the smart grid, or in the explosion of technology developments in electricity. Talking about the latter is not a threat to maintaining the "light switch" rule.

Consumer outreach on grid modernization has been increasing in recent years, and utilities have for the most part done a great job in education efforts related to smart meters and other specific new developments. But I think it is time to be aware of the "hotness" factor and branch out a bit more to talk to and with audiences about how the electricity industry is changing. In some cases, that can be accomplished by creating simple events that are easy for people to attend, especially by partnering with companies and organizations that have a

membership base that can be invited. In other cases, it will mean seeking out the many opportunities where groups are always looking for speakers for their regularly occurring meetings.

I am not just telling you utility folks that you should get out and about a little bit more. Some of the rest of you can also look for opportunities to do something along these lines. But one essential rule: I am talking about doing some discussion with a general audience - Not trying to influence an audience one-way or the other. Just help your audience understand what is going on and what is coming their way. Another essential rule: don't overwhelm them with power points. A few slides are good, but otherwise just talk to your audience and try to answer their questions.

What is happening in energy and electricity is never going to rival the entertainment, consumer electronics or other areas as one that the public devotes

time to following and learning about. But we are not the backwaters of their mindset, either. We are hot. No....wait...I mean we are cool.....well, you know what I mean.

Best

Dan