C A S E S T U D Y No. 1560

HOW A PROGRAM IS CONSTRUCTIVELY CHANGING CONSUMER HABITS

Educating various publics as to prudent use of energy is becoming part of the public relations activities of every type of organization, whether it is involved in that vital commodity's production or distribution or, even more likely, simply consumption.

Electric power distributors are, of course, in the forefront of the effort and one often overlooked aspect of it was the subject of a campaign introduced last winter by the Hydro Electric Commission of North York, commonly known as North York Hydro (NYH). Headquartered at Willowdale, Ontario, Canada (near Toronto), the publicly owned utility supplies electricity, which it purchases from Ontario Hydro (also publicly owned) to a population of 550,000. NYH pays approximately $7 million a month for that power. A major portion of the bill is accounted for by the size of the "peak" demand, which customarily occurs between 5 pm and 7 pm on winter weekdays. That is a time of heavy use of both home appliances and lights.

NYH estimated that perhaps $2,000,000 a year could be saved if the peak demand could be lowered by 40,000 kilowatts, which is 5.4% of, for example, the peak in February 1976. Smoothing out use of electricity would also reduce the amount of new capacity needed by NYH and therefore future consumer rate increases. And it would ease the strain on Ontario Hydro's own peak demand, thereby lessening the risk of brownouts or blackouts.

A vigorous effort was therefore undertaken to persuade customers to minimize use of electricity during the high usage period. . . NYH's Chairman John Dunn and General Manager Donald K. White approved a five month program (November 1976 through March 1977) which was developed and coordinated by its PR Officer Steve Orr under the direction of Alex Christie, Director of Consumer Service. . . The budget was eventually set at $25,000.

Titled "Save It 'Til Seven," the campaign had two specific aims in addition to persuading consumers to help reduce the peak load: pointing out that NYH shares customer concerns about rising electric rates and power shortages and increasing public awareness of NYH as a responsible member of the community.

One week in advance of the official opening, a press kit was hand-delivered to 48 media outlets in the utility's area (three urban dailies; 20 radio and 10 TV stations; and 15 weekly- and foreign-language newspapers). . . The kit held, among other things, a two-page release which: announced the campaign; explained why, if successful, it would, in Dunn's words, "help keep hydro bills from going up so much in the years ahead"; and described how the effort would be promoted. . . North York's Mayor proclaimed November 1 to 6 to be "Save It 'Til Seven Week". . . Other releases on the campaign were distributed periodically.

Communication tools and procedures included the following:

A four-page, green-and-yellow folder was sent with bills to all NYH's 139,000 customers. It featured a sketch of an alarm clock highlighting the 5 pm - 7 pm period and urged postponing use of power to "help reduce future increases in your hydro rates." Inside it explained why a high peak-load makes electricity more expensive and listed ways for reducing consumption during that period. Recommended were: use just one appliance at a time; use dishwashers after 7 pm; minimize hot water consumption; turn off extra TV sets; don't light unoccupied rooms; and postpone Christmas lighting until 7 pm. The back page urged the reader to "Avoid the Hydro Rush Hour -- Save It 'Til Seven and Slow the Growing Cost of Electricity."

The folder also invited readers to telephone or visit the NYH office for a free campaign button and an "appliance reminder sticker". . . The former, 2¼ inches in diameter and printed in green on bright yellow, displayed the slogan and a disconnected electric plug and cord. . . The sticker, self-adhesive, two inches square, and printed in bright red on a white background, simulated a

"DON'T"-type traffic sign (by having a diagonal line through the time period 5 pm - 7 pm). . . A button and two of the stickers were delivered with a $3\frac{1}{2}$x$7\frac{1}{2}$-inch card which described the program and expressed hope that the recipient would put the stickers on major appliances and "pass the word on to your friends and neighbors."

Buttons and stickers were also distributed by NYH customer representatives and through apartment managements, stores, offices, and schools. All 420 NYH employes wore them regularly.

Employe cooperation was enlisted through issues of the company's monthly bulletin (which is sent to their homes). It carried an advance story and, later, articles and inserts which told more about the energy crisis and the program. One, for example, reproduced an Ontario Hydro bill for a month's supply of power and then gave an explanation of how a successful "Save It 'Til Seven" program would have cut the cost. . . Employes received inter-office memos featuring the campaign slogan and were addressed by Dunn and White. . . Progress reports and news items were posted on bulletin boards in the utility's four facilities.

Two hundred counter cards, each carrying the headline, "Between 5 and 7, Please Turn It Off," were produced. These were placed by Orr and NYH customer representatives in such places as libraries, offices, swimming pools, banks, stores, post-offices, apartment buildings, and schools (25).

Advertising showcards were used on public transit buses and a backlighted sign was installed on the main concourse of a major subway station. Ads, 400 lines in length, appeared regularly in two local weeklies and occasionally in the Toronto dailies and the area's foreign language periodicals.

A large outdoor sign at NYH headquarters displayed campaign messages.

Dunn and White made numerous public appearances. They spoke at municipal council and citizens meetings and other gatherings and were interviewed by two radio stations.

The speeches and other campaign activities earned good publicity in most of the area's media.

Any organization which made an effort to support the campaign received all possible assistance. For example, if it arranged a meeting of employes, Orr and other NYH representatives appeared in person. They described the program, showed a 25-minute color film, "What Time Does The Power Go Off?" which had been prepared by the Canadian General Electric Company, and then responded to questions.

Measuring results of such a program is difficult, but it clearly appears to have been a success. For example, there would normally have been an increase in peak electrical power usage, between December 1975 and December 1976, of 20,000 to 30,000 kilowatts more than that which actually occurred. This obviously saved NYH money and helped to minimize future rate increases (inevitable because Ontario Hydro was already operating at a loss). . . And, comments Orr, "the program has certainly brought our company to the forefront". . . Management is so enthusiastic about the approach that it will be used again this winter -- and with a budget twice that of last year.

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