

Engaging and Communicating with Your Stakeholders

How you engage and communicate with your stakeholders has changed dramatically. Stakeholders used to be sophisticated about the energy industry. That, however, is no longer true. More and more, unsophisticated stakeholders are extremely interested in what you are doing and in what you are saying.

Why? Two reasons, mainly. First, the increasing amounts of renewable generation on the power grid, especially from distributed energy resources (DERs); and second, customer choices and their accompanying energy management.

Regulators, advocacy organizations, community officials and politicians, legislators, investors, the media, key commercial customers, businesses, and homeowners are all paying closer attention. Everything you communicate is analyzed and critically assessed. As a result, how you engage your stakeholders speaks volumes.

Memorable Messaging. While many factors comprise your stakeholder engagement and outreach, your communication benefits from a simple, clear narrative: an account of connected and complicated information presented with a single voice in a sequence of commonly understood words, concepts, and ideas. *In other words, a focused, memorable message presented simply, and repeated.* This messaging must be conveyed in presentations, interviews, conversations, testimonies, and in news reports as well as in your many written reports and studies. How you effectively communicate this focused message with different segments of your diverse stakeholder group, however, must differ.

Several Basic Tenets. Effective communication, based on trusting human interactions, builds strong relationships. A number of basic tenets can be applied to deepen the effectiveness of engaging and communicating with your audience of stakeholders.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IS AN ART. While everyone communicates, not everyone connects. Everything said isn't heard; everything written isn't read. The art of communication is to deliver a compelling message that resonates with your audience. For that to happen, communication must reach your audience at their level. In other words, the art of communication isn't about you; it's about them.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION HAS A VOICE. The humanity in your words is its voice. It reaches beyond the definition and conveyance of words. Voice is what your audience hears. Voice connects. Your communication must move past robotic corporate speak. In its place, sincere, authentic words create a sense of worth and result in conversations because listeners and readers respond in kind.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IS DIRECTED. Different audiences demand individualized messages. Why? Because each audience comprises different people, knowledge levels, roles, and motivations. The better an audience is understood, the better an effective individualized message can be crafted, imparted, and received.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SPEAKS TO YOUR AUDIENCE. Communicating a concept to a sophisticated audience can employ industry-specific jargon and concepts. Communicating this same concept to an unsophisticated audience must be simpler, and speak at their level of understanding.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION CONSIDERS THE KNOWLEDGE LEVEL. Communication is most effective when it is imparted at a knowledge level on par with that of your audience. In general, communication is best aimed slightly lower than that knowledge level, simply because we all can use with a bit more depth of understanding (a nice way of saying people don't know as much as they let on).

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION REQUIRES A RECEIPT. Communication is two-way. You impart information; your audience receives and understands it. But do they understand it in the way you meant? To be assured of that, you must get a receipt: a response that ensures your audience understand your message as you intended.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IS TRUE. Audiences can be critical. When presented with new information, new concepts, new ideas, audiences question its validity. To counter this, information must be true. Communication that is true builds trust.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IS A CONVERSATION. Ultimately, the essence of effective communication is a conversation between two people. What you say and write, to be most effective, must not be directed at audiences per se, but rather to individuals, on a human level. Only in a true conversation can a bond be built, a bond that can lead to a different perspective, an appreciation, a trust, and ultimately a stronger relationship.

Effective communication is important to your strategic objectives and goals. You want your audiences to understand your position, and get on board. For this to happen, your communication, clearly understood, becomes paramount.

The Art of Inquiry. While stakeholders express a fairly common thread of issues, there is only one way to know exactly what is on their minds: ask questions!

When communicating, there's an overriding tendency to tell people, to teach people, what you want them to know. The problem: while telling people delivers the information, it also ends the conversation. Instead, consider the point you want to make, then, ask questions your audience must answer. This engages people and involves them; they become part of the communication. And that starts the conversations that build relationships.

Lessons Learned. Through extensive experience, a number of lessons learned have emerged that enhance stakeholder engagement.

LISTENING. Stakeholders and everyone involved in the process must be listened to, and their thoughts and ideas accepted regardless of validity. As a result, respectful, intelligent dialogue ensues.

POLITICAL. Politics might come into play. It must be recognized and adroitly handled.

UNIFIED. Ideas and direction from top executives, integrated with the hands-on efforts of everyday issues, can result in a comprehensive, yet pointed unified message.

COORDINATED. A coordinated communication effort is well worth the time and effort. Together with a unified message, it ensures consistency that fosters confidence in you.

CONVERSATIONS. The time before and after meetings allows for individual conversations that break down barriers and establish rapport.

Applying these and other lessons during your stakeholder interactions demonstrate your respect and consideration and, at a minimum, start your relationships on solid ground.

A Partnering Collaboration. We would be honored to collaborate with you to better engage your stakeholders. We can identify how your stakeholders perceive you—an external viewpoint that provides an eye-opening perspective—and ensure that your communication does not suffer from a internally-focused myopia. Ultimately, your stakeholder engagement and outreach attain a level of communication that builds trust and creates a stronger relationship from which everyone involved benefits.

