

Demystifying the kilowatt-hour



Wright-Hennepin Electric uses the Internet to educate members about electricity use

By Tracie Bettenhausen

It's the most basic thing an electric cooperative does. Send kilowatt-hours out, send the bills out later.

So what happens when the customer can't believe they would've used that much electricity?

Usually, the customer will call their local electric cooperative. The customer service representative will ask a slew of questions: Did you get a new television? Did you buy video games for the kids? Have you had company over?

Usually, the customer asks questions of their own. What the heck is a kilowatt-hour anyway?

Mark Vogt knows these conversations well. Today, he's the chief executive

officer at Wright-Hennepin Cooperative Electric Association, a Basin Electric Class A member in Rockford, MN. But, 30 years prior, he worked in member services.

"We could never help people understand what a kilowatt-hour was," Vogt says. "It's our unit of sale, but it's not something the customers can get their hands around or could really understand. You can't touch it, you can't feel it, you only get billed for it."

The mystifying kilowatt-hour was the topic of conversation when Wright-Hennepin was completing a three-year project to install automated meter reading technology for all their residential member-consumers.

Inspiration struck when they saw a program run by a neighboring cooperative, Crow Wing Cooperative Power & Light Company. "We saw a program where we could look at the daily usage, and we thought that would be just great for customer service," says Carol Purcell, Wright-Hennepin's customer service supervisor.

Wright-Hennepin worked with Accelerated Innovations, a Minnesota-based company, to create a program called MyMeter that fit the bill. "Not only do we see the daily electric use, but our customers could see that as well, for free. That opened up a new avenue of great customer service for us and customers really appreciated it," Purcell says.

Through MyMeter, consumers can sign up and log on through the Internet to see how much power they're using.

For example, if a customer wants to test the efficiency of CFLs, they can use MyMeter. "For instance, you decided to take 15 of your incandescent bulbs and change them out for CFLs. You put a marker in MyMeter on the day you did the switch. Then you can watch to see if your electric use started to go down because you made this change in behavior or the way you use your electricity."

Purcell says some members check their MyMeter once a month, some much more often. "There's one member who has been on MyMeter 1,400 times since the program started," Purcell says. "All of a sudden, they have some control over what they do, and it's their bill, it's their use, and it empowers them to manage their electric use."

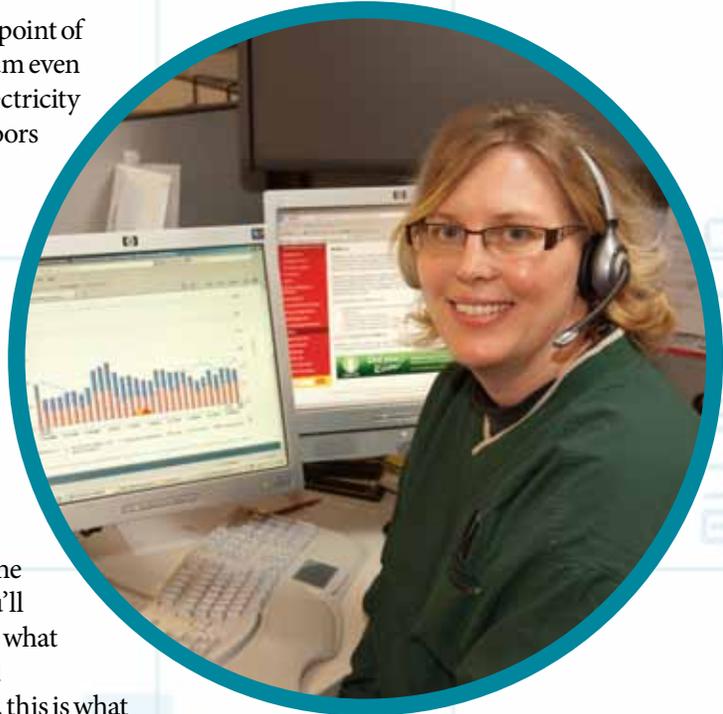
In addition to displaying each consumer's own electricity use, MyMeter shows how much electricity that consumer's

neighbors are using as a point of comparison. The program even points out how much electricity the most efficient neighbors are using.

Even if a customer doesn't use the Internet, Purcell says MyMeter can make a statement. "For customer service, these graphs are so telling. We in customer service can print them out, make little notations, write a little letter and send it out to the customer and say, 'If you'll notice on this day, this is what we saw. If you compared it to last year at this time, this is what we see happening.'"

Sonja Bogart, Wright Hennepin's vice president of Customer Service, Sales and Marketing, says customers who use MyMeter are becoming more educated on how to save electricity and money. "We had a gentleman who called and said, 'I'm never home during the week, I'm only home on weekends, we can't possibly be using this much energy.' We had him pull up his MyMeter graph and sure enough, he was using a ton of energy on weekends. He was doing a lot of gaming with plasma TVs and had a lot of electronics going and just didn't realize how much energy that was taking. Now he's able to cut back on things and see his bills go down significantly."

Bogart says more than 4,300 of their 40,000 residential members have logged in to their MyMeter account. She says their goal is to have more than 2,500 members sign up every year. "We want to start promoting the energy challenge portion of the program as well. People can set an energy savings goal for themselves. We really want them to not just look at MyMeter and see what their electric use is, but actually take action on their use."



Kim Harvey, Wright-Hennepin customer service representative, says MyMeter makes explaining electricity bills to customers a visual experience.

Mark Vogt, Wright-Hennepin CEO, says the level of customer service has grown with the use of MyMeter.



How MyMeter works

Members can voluntarily sign up. Once they log in to the program, they can:

- See by the day or by the hour how many kilowatt-hours are used.
- Set a marker for when they started using a new appliance, for example.
- Participate in an energy challenge by deciding a percentage by which they want to reduce their energy use.
- Compare their own energy use to their neighbors. There's even a break-out to compare themselves to their most efficient neighbors.

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Another co-op's plan to help members

Minnesota Valley Electric Cooperative, Basin Electric Class A member located in Jordan, MN, is conducting a pilot project to help their members understand their bills.

Ryan Hentges, vice president of corporate services, says about 30 members are using Google PowerMeter to see their monthly, daily and hourly electric use. By early summer, the cooperative hopes to be able to offer their members another option for checking their use online, developed by National Information Solutions Cooperative (NISC). A third option, developed by Microsoft, may be offered later on.

"Right now the focus is on getting and presenting good data," says Hentges. "We're focusing on the back-end data, and then making options available to our members because everybody will want to see the data in a different way. They'll be able to log in to our e-bill site, and choose from the Google, NISC and eventually the Microsoft application as well."

On the Web:

The Flip Side blog at basinelectric.wordpress.com:

Demystifying the kilowatt-hour at a Basin Electric member cooperative – Feb. 18, 2010



Tracy Hettwer, Wright-Hennepin employee and member, uses MyMeter to monitor electricity use in her home.

"That (the energy challenge) can be a little bit convicting, especially when you're looking at being environmentally responsible," Purcell says. "Just saying to yourself, 'Am I using my electricity as wisely as I could?' You look to see what your neighbors are doing, and you say, 'Oh, you know, maybe there is some room for some change here.'"

Bogart says consumers who've used MyMeter have been able to reduce their electric bills by 3 percent.

Scott Revenig, business development manager at Accelerated Solutions, says several other cooperatives have started using MyMeter or expressed interest in the program.

"I think this is something the electric cooperative industry can really take a hold of and stand apart from all the others," Vogt says. "Helping demystify the kilowatt-hour can build a level of loyalty that perhaps others in the industry can't."

MyMeter receives national recognition

In February, the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association awarded Wright-Hennepin the "National Community Service Award for Energy Efficiency" for their MyMeter program.

In November 2009, Wright Hennepin won second place in Chartwell Inc.'s "2009 Customer Service Award." Chartwell is an information services company that facilitates the exchange of information among all public utilities in North America. Their annual customer service award is given to utilities that improve service through innovative technology projects.