



When the December ice storm hit Ontario and interrupted power to hundreds of thousands, many found solace in the warm glow of their mobile devices. Connected via social media, they sought out power updates and stayed in touch with friends and family.

1,000 tweets, generating 20,000 retweets, from December 21 to December 31. Halton Hills Hydro had more traffic to its Facebook page than it has customers, with 25,000 unique visitors.

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Social Media – How to for LDCs

The key to starting out is to go slow and have a strategy. Committed resources and staff training are essential, so that staff have the appropriate authority, judgement and experience to navigate the social media environment.

Be conversational, friendly and interesting – you need to move beyond corporate anonymity and develop a personality. Being timely, consistent and credible are critical. And everybody loves photos and videos. Here are some ways LDCs can thrive on social media:

Enlighten

- Post tips on saving money, conserving energy and storm preparation.
- Explain energy production, billing and planning in plain language or through graphics or video.
- Share municipal conservation goals and details on local energy planning.
- Explain the benefits of renewable energy projects.

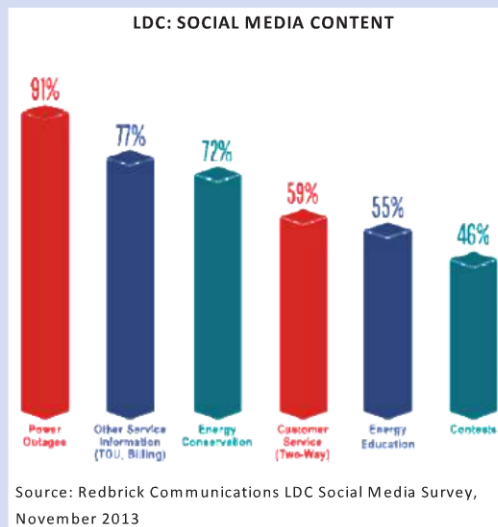
Empower

- Improve customer service by responding to customer concerns in real-time.
- Provide critical storm and outage information in a mobile-accessible format.

Energize

- Create contests and coupons to promote conservation goals.

- Promote community involvement and success stories through photos and videos.
- Start a conversation by using questions, facts and figures.
- Use shares, mentions and retweets to engage with residents, customers and stakeholders.



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on what they can expect. It was a vivid illustration of how social media has changed our world. (For more storm related coverage see page 22.)

Just as technology is creating smart grids to provide real-time system data, social media is driving smarter, real-time communication with customers and improving customer service.

Utilities in Ontario are slowly but surely taking notice. A November 2013 survey by Redbrick Communications of Ontario's local distribution companies (LDCs) found that about 23 per cent are using social media, with an emphasis on Twitter and Facebook.



Halton Hills Hydro has reaped the benefits of social media engagement. The utility, which has about 23,000 customers, is one of the most active on social media in Ontario. Project Manager Jennifer Gordon estimated that 14 per cent of customers engage with Halton Hills Hydro on social media. It has built this following through a steady stream of useful posts that promote conservation, share community information, and celebrate local events.

That social media community became invaluable during the storm. Two staff members continuously monitored social media from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. for days, posting 709 tweets and engaging in 408 direct conversations during the storm, Gordon said. Almost all of this traffic was on mobile devices. There were many inquiries and also much praise for the crews. Because of the goodwill they'd already developed, supportive customers would quickly silence the few online critics.



Beyond emergency situations, social media helps LDCs build stronger relationships with their stakeholders. With Ontario's increased emphasis on community engagement and energy planning, this creates a solid foundation for the future.

While social media is a powerful way to communicate urgent information, Redbrick's survey found that LDCs are also using it to post time of use/billing information and energy conservation promotions and to respond to basic customer service inquiries.

Organizations can be wary of social media's uncontrolled environment and the demand it can place on time and resources. However, these risks can be addressed through simple policies, decision-making tools and pre-planned posting schedules.

Fast and direct, social media promotes greater transparency and accountability. It is also excellent at building goodwill, which clearly pays dividends if and when the lights go out. And, it helps down the road with public discussions about local energy needs and initiatives.

It used to be that the monthly bill was the main platform for customer engagement. Just as websites have become the norm, social media is rapidly becoming standard practice. LDCs that are strategic with these new media can use them to help build a strong corporate reputation and greater community engagement. ■

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