

COMMUNICATION

Of all the input provided by participants in the Community Energy Workshop, the topic of communication ranked among the items that generated the most discussion and feedback. Conversations about the importance of educating and informing customers about key energy-related concepts, plans, goals, etc.; what type of outreach is both necessary and most effective; and what the MGE brand stands for were some topics at the top of the list.

Education

The largest bulk of input related to communication was focused on ways to educate and share information with customers. Whether they wanted MGE to provide specific data to individual households so they could track and adjust their own usage or they referenced the need for neighborhoods to have data that would create some "motivational competition," the concept that personalized information was valuable and would help deepen MGE's level of engagement with customers came through loud and clear.

- *"There is going to need to be a lot of community education."*
- *"This goodwill generated from easy programs could have large impact in energy community. Look for community engagement on basic level. Create goodwill in community."*
- *"Challenge MGE to move beyond informing consumers, but rather educate them from economic perspective. Find ways to educate rather than just informing – can lead to better discussion."*
- *"We have to worry about the older populations with smart tools. Education is very important on the new technologies and the buildings have to be smart now as well. The population is aging so we need to think about those demographics with the smart tools."*

Youth education was called out and suggested to be incorporated more formally into school curricula and via creative means for engaging and educating youth. Whether it was through social media, new technologies or "gamification," there was great interest in exploring options for engaging students. But youth were not the only target audiences identified. Participants also acknowledge that communication channels need to keep in mind a multi-generational audience and have to be tailored to meet the varying needs, interests and access of audiences from both older and younger generations as well as from diverse economic, social and cultural backgrounds.

- *"Be more engaged in the schools, try to get in as soon as you can."*
- *"MGE should implement workshops in school to educate students on energy."*
- *"Formalized education...no one teaches effective energy use in schools or consider this as career development. MGE has some optional outreach programs to some schools."*
- *"How can MGE reach out to kids' schools to make fieldtrips to power plants and educate them at an early level? Get to them early to then make later, good consumers."*
- *"If we start educating our communities when they're young, they'll be engaged with energy and become informed consumers by the time they reach adulthood."*
- *"We need to educate in ways that span age groups."*

Energy efficiency and conservation came up frequently as topics that required additional and ongoing information and engagement. At the very core, participants spoke about the need to help people understand their role in the energy world. It is this understanding, people explained, that would help mobilize customers and other stakeholders to take a vested interest in making progress toward shared community energy goals. In addition, there was interest in education about the energy industry's role in more broad issues such as workforce and economic development. There is also a significant call for more information and education about Energy 2030 and communication about how MGE and the community are reaching interim goals along the way.

- *"Educate consumers – inform consumers about how things work and what is the goal of conserving energy, and how it is implemented."*
- *"Education about all these plans makes participation obvious."*
- *"Community education is key; people often do not understand the importance of conserving."*

- *"MGE needs to continue to educate people at the home level. What should a consumer be thinking about when they are in their home as far as energy management? Enough education isn't getting to the average user. Maybe more technical data."*

Outreach

Much of the discussion about communication also focused on specific ways for MGE to reach out to its customers and other community and industry stakeholders and share important, relevant information with them. Making sure that information reached all audiences and customer segments was a priority, and many recommendations regarding the need for multi-lingual outreach, just and equitable dissemination of information and outreach that took many forms and utilized many communication platforms were key.

- *"MGE has to be innovative in its communication strategies and have accessibility to multiple audiences."*
- *"How can MGE increase energy literacy in the community?"*
- *"Pick a few themes to educate...this is what MGE is doing, businesses do this, resident can do this. Tips of the month. If we all do our part, it will add up."*
- *"When you don't have an effective tool to educate the population, anything that rewards conservation is more used by people of privilege. Any new tools need to think about access and education. Promotion videos also need to reflect multiple audiences and diversity. People need to be able to see themselves in the videos."*
- *"Keep the community informed and engaged as to why they [MGE is] making the changes they are."*

Customize Information for Various Populations

Participants expressed a strong belief that general energy information may provide a valuable reference, but customized information would help people better understand their own role in reaching goals and making choices. Over and over participants provided examples of how information that was tailored to a specific group, business/industry or individual would be more likely to move them to change behavior that would result in a positive community and individual impact.

- *"Help people understand how their individual actions impact overall usage. Personal choices make impact. Feedback loops, mechanism etc. Square footage of a home and how it compares to average to see if they are on high end or low end of average. Student usage of energy might not be motivated to save if it's included in rent. What is the usage split between residential and commercial usage? Data for the community shared in an easy to understand way."*
- *"One of the easiest things that can be done is that the consumers should be more exposed to things I can currently do, immediately, to conserve energy. How do I incentivize myself and educate myself to conserve this energy? I can conserve, I can control, starting right now."*
- *"Small-large business perspective: how does business owner become more energy efficient and work with MGE to make it happen?"*
- *"The Hmong community doesn't really know who MGE is besides someone they pay bills to. Provide better info. about the services that exist to make life better. Teach us how to build energy efficiency into our lifestyles."*
- *"Is the advice being tailored to the person receiving it? Balanced based on the needs of different generations?"*

Deepen Engagement with All Stakeholders

Valuable guidance was provided in terms of how MGE might create more meaningful opportunities to connect with customers and other stakeholders by deepening the current level of engagement with those audiences. Part of the more robust engagement framework included providing information that would motivate customers to change their behavior and, in doing so, help the community reach its Energy 2030 goals. Defining public opportunities for energy-related advocacy were also mentioned.

- *"Why should I care? How can I make a difference? Frame conversation across socioeconomic groups for individuals and businesses. How can I help with the larger goals?"*
- *"Energy is not intuitive. People don't think about energy until they have blackouts. Make energy matter in a fun and engaging way like through competitions and games, or publicity of deep dive – profiles of families that go through comprehensive programs to see if they can maximize energy efficiency and doing better by energy – puts a human face on it."*
- *"There is no 'one size fits all' for community engagement. Knowing the differences in diversity will effect more communities."*
- *"How is the data presented to people who can't access the internet or can't even read?"*
- *"Need to summarize 2030 plans and keep customers informed about the plan and how they are working towards it in multiple languages, particularly Spanish. Communicate in several languages, Spanish, Hmong, English and really expand the ability to relate the information need to go further."*
- *"Keep in mind that the loudest voice is not always the representative of the community – the loudest voices in the past couple of years may not have reflected the views of others who interface with MGE."*

Gathering Input and Feedback

Communication is certainly a two-way street. Participants discussed not only ways for MGE to better communicate with customers but also ways in which MGE could receive and incorporate customer feedback.

- *"Big thing missing on all levels is direct feedback from consumers and users of energy."*
- *"Town hall is moving to social media, that is where people are talking to each other about problems and solutions."*
- *"Short simple surveys where people have incentives to fill them out is a great source of information. Free coffee for 10 questions etc...to engage certain online communities."*

The MGE Brand

The MGE brand and how it is conveyed and perceived by customers was an important aspect of the communication discussion. Issues related to the specific, user-friendly language that should be used, to larger issues of trust and credibility, played a part in the conversation. Participants had ideas and input related to MGE's website and social media presence as well as how it leveraged its valuable community investments. Some discussions also captured the important role MGE's employees – particularly customer service staff – have in developing the company's brand.

- *"If you want to spread this information, you need the initiatives to be bold and visible."*
- *"Website is 'utility written'. Need to talk down to level of customers. E.g. Barrier to online bill pay; E.g. Overall language of content and presentation is not user-friendly; E.g., smart phone apps for younger. Make accessible to all demographics. Easy to understand without additional training or extra knowledge."*
- *"Need to reach out in different ways. Info. on website isn't enough. Barriers: language, internet access. More than written pieces. Want community outreach – come into group of people to improve lack of understanding."*
- *"To get engagement of Latino community you should make the information more colorful (suggestion made by a Latina)."*
- *"Insurance ads talk about dreams. How do we elevate message of basic needs? I want them to be consistent with what their image is, versus what they are actually doing. There is sometime[s] a disconnect between what they want their collaboration to be and what they can do."*
- *"MGE's brand with community partners is very positive."*
- *"Use language that a diverse group of people can relate to."*

Utility Bills as Communication Tools

The utility bill is viewed by many as a key communication tool for MGE and, as such, garnered significant discussion regarding how to better utilize the tool and how to make the bill a more effective source of usable information. Since the bill is also a direct opportunity for customers to engage with MGE, the transaction aspect of paying the bill was a valuable topic of conversation.

- *"MGE is well liked in the community. Name has a good recognition. Keep up with education. Bill is too complicated. Too technical. Someone should be able to explain it to the customers. Also outdoor meters could be explained also."*
- *"Customers don't know what they are paying for in their monthly bill. Educate them on where the money goes. If I save energy what impact will it have?"*
- *"Decentralizing places where people can pay their bills. Offering easier access for people to pay their bills."*