

## Selling the Smart Grid to Consumers? Start By Helping Them Answer One Simple Question

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In all of the hoopla about the technologies used in the Smart Grid, about the real-time pricing plans it will support, and the efficiencies utilities will gain, we often overlook some of the simplest reasons we need to make the grid smarter.

Before we persuade people to allow utilities to control their appliances and equipment, perhaps we could simply let consumers know when appliances and equipment are not working as intended. I have two stories in mind with this suggestion. Both concern customers whose electricity consumption included some that produced no value for them, but the paths to that point were different.

The first story starts with a credit call I listened in on during the 1990s. I was touring the customer call center at the utility I worked for and sitting with some of the customer representatives as they answered the phone. From the first moment of this particular call, it was clear the woman on the other end of the line was deeply distressed. Her bill was over \$400. She had already gotten behind on past bills and this bill was a blow she didn't know how to recover from. But the heartbreaking part was the cause of the bill. Her water heater had malfunctioned at some point early in the billing cycle and been consuming huge amounts of electricity without her knowledge. She not only didn't know how much she was buying then – what she was buying had no value to her. The utility could do nothing; the 'use the power, pay for the power' rule applied.

The second story is even sadder because the problem was of much longer duration. The customer lived in a small manufactured house but was experiencing bills that stressed her ability to pay. In searching for help, she got signed up for an energy audit. The audit not only uncovered problems in her heating and cooling fan that were causing the fan to run regardless of the thermostat setting, but it also revealed that the ducting underneath her house had never been connected. She was heating and cooling the crawl space.

How much electricity might we save if all customer appliances and equipment simply worked

as designed? How many heartaches might utilities spare customers if there was a way to let them know when consumption began to exceed past levels for the structure or, ideally, an expectation set in an in-person energy review?

Many tout the Smart Grid's ability to let utilities control consumer appliances or allow those appliances to respond to price signals. Consumers might actually be pleased just to have reassurance the appliances and equipment are working as intended and that a decision to use a given appliance is not triggering unknown and highly unpleasant consequences.

Consumers might just want to start with the ability to answer the question: is it working?

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