

Installing a Few Smart Meters & Trans

Public (and Utility) awareness at Newmarket-Tay Power Distribution Ltd.

A full priority installation of 27,000 smart meters covering the utility's entire customer base in Newmarket and Tay in eight months. An OEB-approved smart meter and time-of-use (TOU) pilot with 250 residential customers receiving real TOU bills for over fourteen months.

Approximately ten per cent of residential customers fully transitioned to TOU billing by year-end 2007. Although the numbers are impressive, far more interesting is the story behind the story: the complete cultural and systemic transformation required for a local electricity utility to reinvent itself as a smart meter/TOU organization.

Public awareness and utility awareness

"We understood right away that implementing smart meters was not a one-time thing," says Paul Ferguson, president of Newmarket-Tay Power Distribution Ltd. Rather, this new technology would "fundamentally change the way we do business." For the implementation to work, it was clear that an ongoing and multi-faceted public awareness campaign would be necessary.

But along with the commitment to fostering public awareness came the

recognition of something that might be called *utility* awareness – that is, a rethinking of "every aspect of the technical side of our business as we embraced the challenges of becoming a fully capable smart meter/TOU utility," says Ferguson.

Putting a face on smart meters

Given the unease in the community about the coming smart meters—much of it fuelled by media coverage that sometimes took an alarmist perspective with limited understanding of the issues—it was decided that smart meters needed a friendly public face. So the utility invented one, and Smarty Meter, a public spokesmeter, was born.

A commentator on community conservation issues, Smarty Meter has written articles for local print media, appeared on regional television news, helped greet journalists at media events and even occasionally offered advice at a smart meter installation. At well over six-feet tall, he cuts an imposing figure when he goes out in public as he has for a couple of local Santa Claus parades where he has been accompanied by the utility's other conservation and smart meter advocates, Twisty and SuperStat. Rounding out the team of smart meter mascots, Peak keeps an eye on peak demand periods, and DimBulb, a surly incandescent bulb, offers misinformed hearsay about smart meters and TOU which is routinely refuted in public venues by his brighter colleagues. Their exchanges have been captured in cartoon strips in local media and in newsletters, and their images adorn self-adhesive decals, brochures and other customer print materials.

Public meetings, media and print

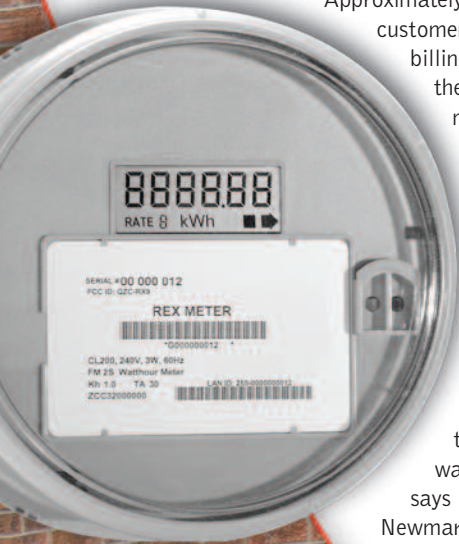
It has been left to the human representatives of the utility to host over a dozen public day-time and evening meetings throughout the community introducing smart meters and TOU. These sessions featured formal presentations and "open mike" questions and comments from the audience.

Media interest on a range of smart meter and conservation issues has been actively solicited by the utility with press releases while media events have been staged to get the attention of local and regional outlets of print, radio and television organizations. Whenever media reports got the story wrong, the utility contacted journalists and editors and offered clarification both on and off the record.

More traditional customer communications rounds out the public awareness campaign: brochures on smart meters, bill inserts on conservation tools and programs and advertising in local media. Just before accounts are converted to TOU billing, customer information packages are delivered which include two months of individual customer usage history presented under TOU rates. TOU customers can also access their monthly and daily TOU consumption profiles through a secure website.

Changing the utility itself

The cultural change required within the utility itself was no less far-reaching than what was being expected from customers facing smart meters. "Previously, we read meters and billed," says utility president Ferguson.



Newmarket-Tay Power Distribution's smart meter mascot Smarty, helps to install a new residential smart meter. (photo courtesy of Newmarket-Tay Power Distribution)

forming a Utility

"But now we find we're running a communications network where we talk about 'dropped calls' when a meter fails to communicate."

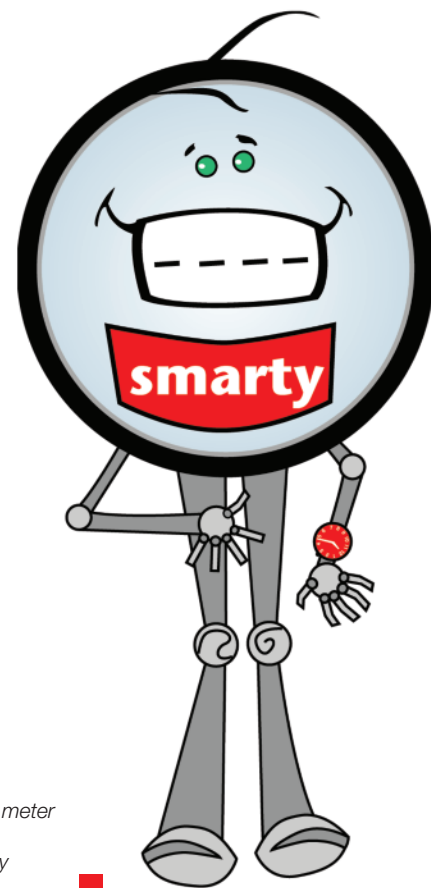
The way we used to approach billing, the way we managed our meters, "all that is now fundamentally different with a resulting change in how we do business with our customers." To become a "fully capable" smart meter/TOU utility, advises Ferguson, an organization has to be prepared to "move in a whole new direction both in systems and in culture." Certainly, the transformation to manage smart meters and TOU represents a far greater change than "what we faced in 2001 and 2002 getting reading for market opening."

Today, all of Newmarket-Tay Power Distribution Ltd.'s 27,000 meters are reporting at or above the provincially-mandated standard. As for its commitment to public awareness, the utility has accepted that this new engagement of its customers is simply now part of how it interacts with those it serves.

And how is it working so far? In its first major billing cycle as the utility launched its phased-in TOU conversion across its service area, approximately 1,100 TOU bills went out to customers. Six of them called with questions.

Newmarket Hydro is an operating division of Newmarket-Tay Power Distribution Ltd. The utility is responsible for servicing over 30,000 residential and business customers in Newmarket as well as in the communities that make up the Township of Tay on the southern shores of Georgian Bay.

Smarty is a character created by Newmarket-Tay Power Distribution to help educate and market smart meter implementation in the community. (picture courtesy of Newmarket-Tay Power Distribution)



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