

Wired In—Working with the Press to Get the Story Right



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It can be challenging to clearly communicate electric power industry issues to the public because many media professionals are unfamiliar with industry concepts, regulations, and technology. Yet, clear communication by utilities and regulators is essential for informing customers who may have concerns about reliability, safety, and cost. It can also inform public agencies and elected officials, who are engaged in critical decision-making and policymaking that directly affect the economy, the environment, national security, and stock prices.

Journalists also have a professional responsibility to understand the technical aspects of the issues and to provide the public with fair, accurate reporting, even under the pressure of deadlines and shrunken newsrooms.

While there are experienced energy reporters, especially those at trade publications, most journalists cover utility stories only occasionally and may lack the time to cultivate industry expertise and respectful relationships with industry communications professionals. Nevertheless, journalists should ask utilities and regulators as many questions as needed to understand the concepts, technical terms, and issues in their stories.



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Before the shale gas boom, Consumers Energy proposed to regulators a plan to build a new \$1 billion-plus coal-fired unit at an existing power plant, and the proposal came under heavy fire from anti-coal activists who demanded solar, wind, and energy conservation. A local reporter assigned to cover the controversy spoke frequently with the utility's communications officer and became familiar with all aspects of the proposal, including projections for customer demand and jobs creation. That process produced what the utility felt was balanced coverage on an issue important to the community.

As Jeffrey Holyfield, former executive director of communications at Consumers Energy, told me, “If you don’t translate the technical and economic data and make them simple for the reporters, they have to do it themselves or go to someone on the other side—and you may not like it.”

Rather than simply providing journalists with press releases and dense documents, utility communicators can put industry jargon into plain English and explain in easy-to-understand terms how customers may be impacted by rate requests, regulatory changes, power plant construction and decommissioning proposals, new legislation, and court orders. Avoid acronyms and terms that make sense to everyone in the business but not to the general public.

What’s a State Reliability Mechanism (SRM)? Or financial securitization? Or a power purchase agreement (PPA)? Or avoided cost? Will the confused, on-deadline journalist parrot the jargon, explain it incorrectly, or even omit an important point from the story? Instead of assuming that a reporter understands the concept of “stranded costs,” a utility media professional might explain it as a utility’s infrastructure investments that may become unnecessary if market or regulatory conditions change substantially.

The press frequently reports on regulatory decisions about rate increases. Rather than announcing only gross figures—a \$122 million rate hike, for example—utilities and regulators should explain how those changes affect the average residential ratepayer’s bills. Will they go up or down, and by how much each month? The reasons for the rate changes should be clear and explicit as well.

Utility and regulatory communicators also need to pay closer attention to journalists’ well-intentioned efforts to ensure balanced coverage. These include interviewing sources on opposing sides along with experts unaffiliated with either side—and providing all perspectives with approximately equal space or air time. In some cases, reporters may give too much credence to positions that are unsubstantiated by data, reports, and other evidence. Utilities should provide the media with well-documented evidence to support their positions and buttress their credibility. This could take the form of reports with highlighted key passages, jargon-free executive summaries, or bullet points.

Utility communicators can point reporters to a lack of evidence supporting the other side’s arguments—and even suggest that reporters ask the other side for evidence.

Reporters can enhance the credibility of their stories by interviewing independent experts, such as those at research organizations and university professors who study the industry, energy economics, environmental policy, and related topics. Their views and analysis can add perspective to the news coverage.

In an era of 24/7 news, utilities should be prepared to respond to press inquiries as quickly as possible. In other words, make it easy for journalists to get the story right.

Getting the story right not only provides the public with a clear picture of utility operations, rates, and regulatory processes. It can also help build public confidence in the electric power industry.