

# Public Power Marketing: How a Small Team Can Deliver Big Results

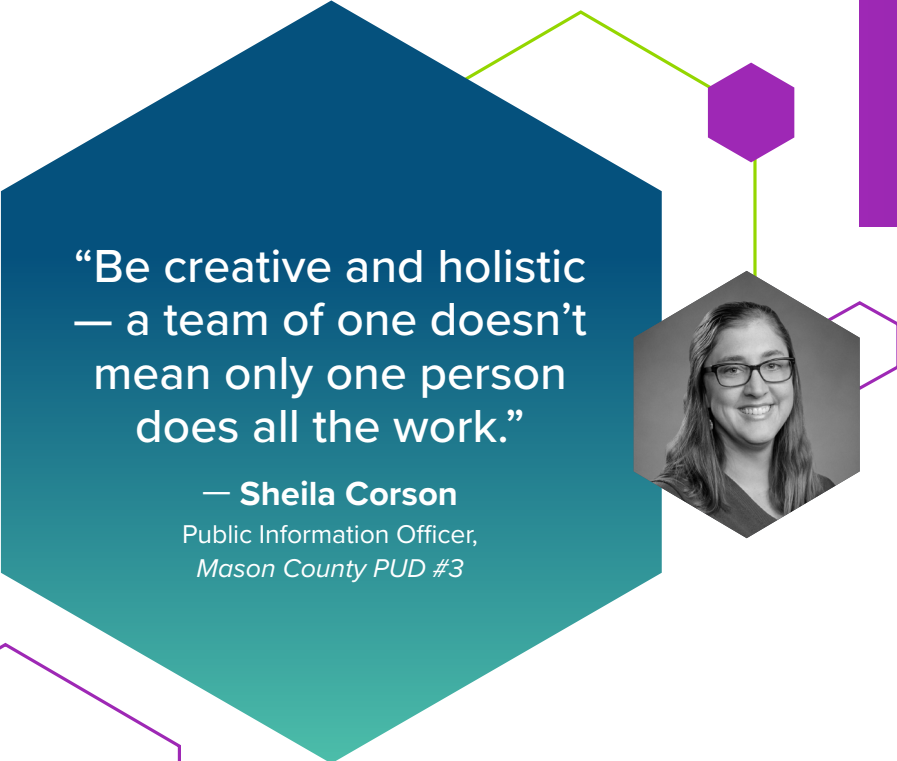


## Adopting a “We” Mentality

**Although you may be the only person performing marketing tasks for your public power utility, that doesn't mean you have to do everything yourself!** That's a fast road to burnout. Instead, success often stems from adopting a “we,” not an “I,” attitude, public power marketers told us.

“Be creative and holistic — a team of one doesn't mean only one person does all the work,” said Sheila Corson, a Public Information Officer at Mason County PUD #3 in Washington State, which provides electricity to about 36,000 customers.

Corson is one half of a marketing team of two, but she stretches her marketing initiatives by tapping into free resources that are provided by membership organizations such as the American Public Power Association (APPA) and the Northwest River Partners (NWRP).



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— **Sheila Corson**

Public Information Officer,  
Mason County PUD #3



## Don't Overlook Free Resources

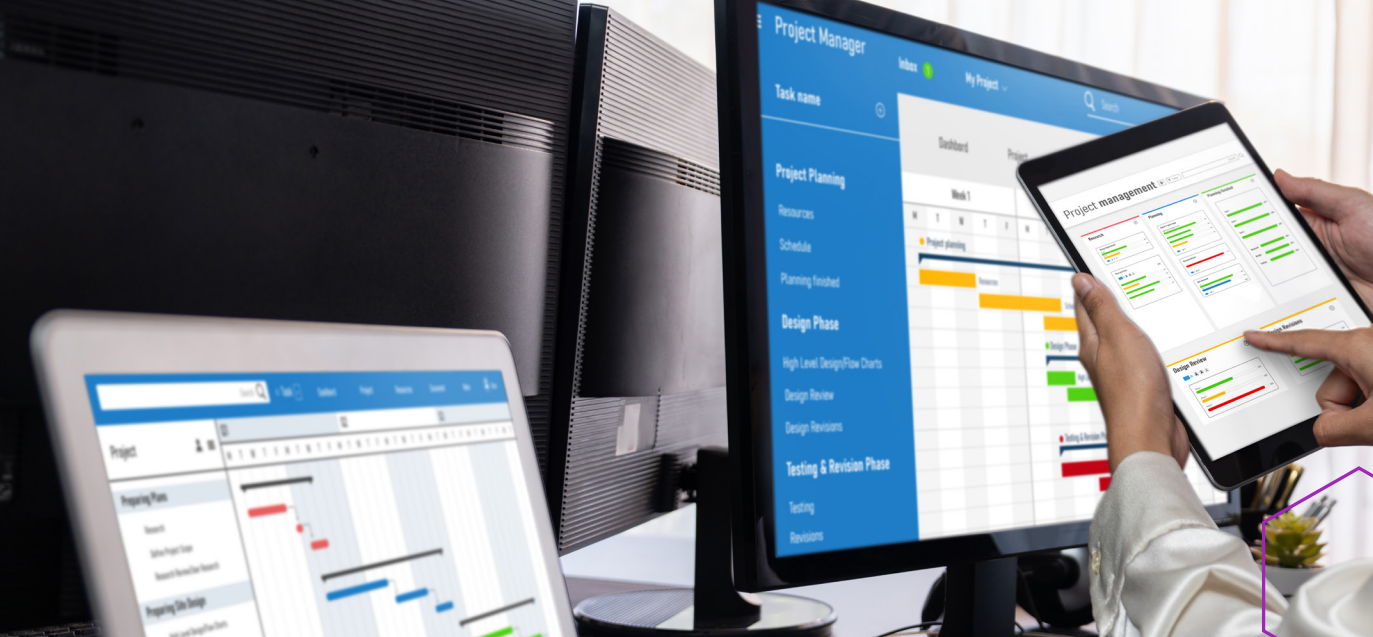
Membership organizations like APPA, regional or statewide public power organizations, joint action agencies and single-issue organizations like NWRP and Safe Electricity provide some communications and marketing resources to their members.

The resources available to APPA members include **videos, infographics, social media posts, draft op-ed articles and other resources designed to build support in the community**. Many also touch on how public power is different than other type of electricity providers.

Across the nation, 2,000 community-owned utilities provide electricity to 49 million people. The median APPA member serves about 2,000 customers. This means that the typical public power utility would have one person performing marketing tasks. That person may wear several metaphorical “hats,” like manager of customer service, as well as marketer.

“We like to say we admire and acquire — with permission,” Corson continued. “If you are able to attend conferences, network like crazy to learn what's working for other public power providers, and why, so you can see if that could work for you. You don't have to reinvent the wheel.”





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— **Crystal Kemp**  
Chief Marketing Officer,  
Conway Corporation



## Challenges and How to Overcome Them

Not reinventing the wheel was a shared insight from the four public power marketers we interviewed, all of whom had marketing teams of five or less. Three of the four utilities had a two-person marketing team.

Practitioners told us that as small teams, their challenges typically come down to limited time, resources and budgets. **They said the best way to fit marketing tasks into established budgets was to set priorities and keep them.**

“It can be hard to think strategically if you’re busy doing daily tasks like posting to social media,” said Crystal Kemp, Chief Marketing Officer for Conway Corporation, an Arkansas multi-service utility providing electricity to about 34,000 customers. “Really good ideas can get dropped when you get busy.”

She guards against that by blocking time on her calendar to focus on longer-term tasks like assessing marketing effectiveness, learning a new skill or planning future initiatives. Kemp recommends practitioners continually separate projects into “must do” and “would like to do.” She recommends getting comfortable telling peer departments, “We can’t do that right now.”

“Saying ‘yes’ to one task means you have to say ‘no’ to others,” agreed Corson of Mason County PUD #3. “You need to manage expectations and prioritize.”

“Marketers with small teams have to work smarter, not harder.”

— Jenny Foss

Communications and Administrative Coordinator,  
Elk River Municipal Utilities



Beyond triage, recycling some seasonal content was one solution mentioned by several utility marketers. This makes sense, as there is some seasonality to many marketing topics. In the summer, energy-saving tips are a staple; in the winter, share energy safety advice for the holidays. The content for these seasonal marketing pieces doesn't change much from year to year.

Jenny Foss, Communications and Administrative Coordinator for Minnesota's Elk River Municipal Utilities (ERMU), said reusing seasonal materials is an easy way to stretch your marketing resources from year to year. She mentioned **811 Call Before You Dig**, **Lineworker Appreciation Day** and **Public Power Week** as promotions they rerun each year, with minor updates.

“Marketers with small teams have to work smarter, not harder,” Foss said. Her multi-service utility provides electricity to about 13,000 customers in a service area that is 35 miles northwest of Minneapolis.







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— **Lisa Stowe**

Marketing and Communications Manager,  
*Westfield Gas & Electric (WG&E)*



Lisa Stowe, the Marketing and Communications Manager at Westfield Gas & Electric (WG&E) in Massachusetts, agreed, adding that she has been fortunate to have the budget to hire high school interns in recent years. Stowe’s department of two marketing professionals has been augmented by one intern from time to time. Her multi-service utility provides electricity to about 18,000 customers in Western Massachusetts.

“Our interns are younger and hipper than most of our staff, and they bring an important perspective to the work,” Stowe said. “As digital natives, they are really good at some things, like social media and videos, that complement the skill sets of our staff who perform more traditional marketing work. And when you explain to an intern why you perform a task the way you do, it makes you think whether that is the best way to perform that task.”

WG&E has also provided Stowe with a budget to work with an outside advertising agency on specific pieces, including safety campaigns and social media posts. Based on WG&E’s budget, that works out to about one-quarter to one-third of a full-time equivalent (FTE) employee, she estimated.

Photo courtesy of Westfield Gas & Electric

# Actionable Recommendations to Achieve Greater Marketing Success

The aforementioned utility marketers emphasized the importance of responding to community needs. Your message is more likely to be heard by your target community if your utility first shows that it's working to create solutions for local challenges.

"People of all ages are interested in what's going on in their community," said Corson. "Marketing is all about connections, people connecting with people. When trying to interact with members of the community, it's best to go where they are, whether that's farmers markets or community events."

The good news is that there's no shortage of places to interact with members of your community. Corson explained that Mason County PUD #3 works in tandem with a local appliance retailer to market low-income energy efficiency programs and appliance rebates. The two have come to an agreement that the utility will send appliance rebates directly to the retailer who will, in turn, charge income-qualified customers only for the amount of an appliance that is not covered by a rebate.

For example, customers can pay as little as \$50 or \$100 for a new, high-efficiency washer or dryer that retails for \$800. Corson said that this partnership has been very successful at reaching its target market.

"We've had a really great response," she said. "The appliance store is thrilled because it's selling more appliances. The customers are thrilled because they're getting new appliances at a deep discount. We're thrilled that we can directly help customers."

"A small marketing team can't be everywhere at once," Corson continued. "By partnering with this appliance retailer, we get to interact with customers when they want or need a new appliance." She estimated that one-fifth of Mason County PUD #3's customers could be categorized as low-income, and thus eligible for the appliance rebates.

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An important piece of community engagement is allowing your utility's customers to see "behind the scenes" so they can better understand the work that goes into keeping the power running. Last August, Elk River Municipal Utilities held an open house at their new field services building. There were tours of the facility, lineworker demonstrations, utility equipment on display, educational booths and games.

As a multi-service utility that also delivers water, one of the more popular events at the open house was a "hydrant hysteria" demonstration

featuring an all-female team of two field service technicians assembling a fire hydrant (which has over 40 separate pieces) in under two minutes.

Foss estimated that about 500 people came to the August event in near 100-degree temperatures. "The heat was intense combined with high humidity. Still, everyone had a great time because we promoted and delivered a fun for all ages event where the community could learn more about the utility they own."

Photo courtesy of Elk River Municipal Utilities



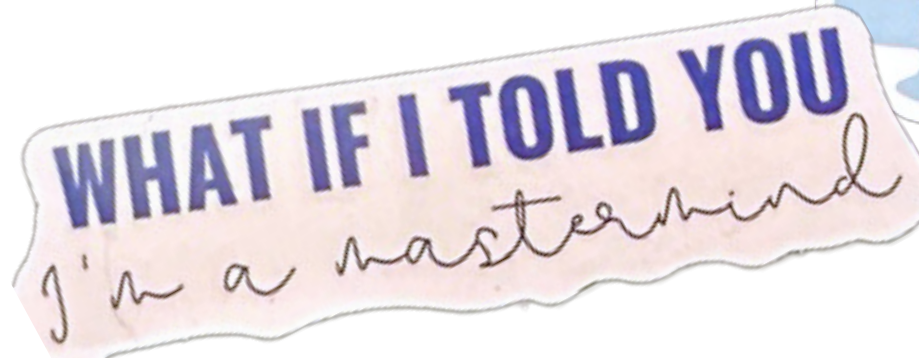


Sometimes, utility marketers need to think outside the typical marketing funnel to engage with customers in ways that interest the community as a whole.

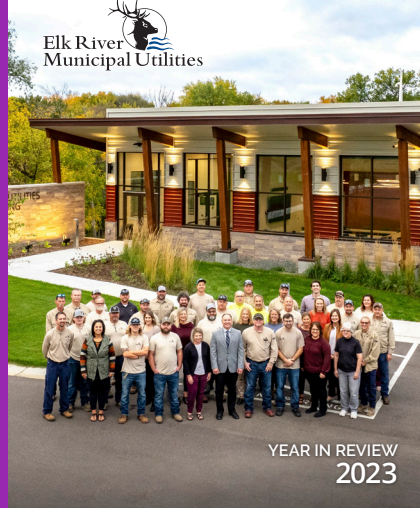
Stowe of WG&E recalled that her utility does an annual career day for their local high schools. To attract visitors, utility employees hand out stickers at their booth. However, instead of handing out strictly electricity-themed premiums, WG&E representatives give away fun, sometimes silly, stickers. One year they handed out stickers of fruits and vegetables, and more recently, they gave away Taylor Swift themed stickers. As could have been expected, they were a hot commodity.

“Not only did the high schoolers go crazy for the Taylor Swift stickers,” Stowe said, “but I saw several adults sneak up behind the students to grab a handful. Maybe they had teenagers at home who were fans.”

Although stickers may seem like a trivial giveaway, it's quite the opposite. Stickers are a powerful way for people to showcase their social group. Take a look at the laptops students use. Chances are they're covered with stickers: bands they like, video games they play, places they've visited and coffee shops they frequent. Stickers are a powerful nonverbal way of connecting.







Rather than trying to explain how public power differs from investor-owned utilities or electric cooperatives, marketers recommended showing the public power difference in social media posts, customer newsletters and marketing collateral. For example, highlight electric lineworkers who are local residents restoring power in inclement weather or electric safety demonstrations at schools. Emphasize your utility's involvement in and service to the community.

"A lot of our marketing is focused on our people telling our story. Because, in many ways, our story is the community's story," Kemp said.

She explained that Conway Corporation was founded in 1929 as a way to keep a local college from relocating to another part of the state. The utility's commitment to education has continued to this day: Employees greet students when they return to class in the fall, read books to them and participate in events for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) students.

STEM fairs are Conway Corporation's most successful marketing campaign, she said, adding that anything connected to education provides the best forum to meet current, and future, customers.

"It's important to show real people doing real work," agreed Foss. "But try to get creative."

Practitioners recommended marketers use colorful, personal or humorous visuals to capture the attention of those who scan social media platforms. Create memorable videos, mesmerizing infographics or relevant memes that stand out.

"On social media, you really need to catch their eyes — you only have a few seconds," Corson said.

Foss also said her team's marketing effectiveness has been enhanced by subscribing to content from Questline Digital. "Questline has been great in providing us monthly marketing ideas and content," she said. "It is a time-saving resource that allows us to focus on other projects. We've had a very positive experience with the quality of the product and the people at Questline."

# Building Customer Relationships with Questline Digital

“Research has shown that effective communication is the basis of all solid relationships between a business and its customers.”

— **Brian Lindamood**

VP, Marketing and Content Strategy,  
*Questline Digital*



For over 30 years, Questline Digital has worked with utilities to build cohesive digital experiences that educate, engage and inspire action among diverse customer segments. With strategic solutions that mix multimedia content and data-driven strategies, Questline Digital helps utilities boost engagement and drive customer satisfaction.

One of Questline Digital's proprietary solutions continues to deliver results: **Newsletters**. Utilities nationwide work with Questline Digital to develop residential or commercial newsletters, which explore topics of interest to customers, such as ways to reduce electricity use, water conservation best practices or time-of-use rate explanations.

With the newsletter solution, utilities can customize Questline Digital's written content to the specific needs of their communities, or add their own local content.

Another popular service is Questline Digital's **Welcome Series**, which provides onboarding resources to new utility customers.

“We have found that utility customers are most receptive to utility outreach at the very beginning of service,” said Brian Lindamood, Questline Digital's Vice President of Marketing and Content Strategy. “These messages contain valuable information that customers need to know for a smooth onboarding experience, including My Account setup, billing and payment options, outage resources, safety and conservation education, and program information.”

Questline Digital's newest service, **SmartVX**, is a personalized video platform that integrates into a utility's customer information system to provide customers with messages that are relevant and unique to each viewer. These videos can communicate on a range of topics, including energy usage, program promotions, bill-payment options and more.

“Digital tools don't replace the human touch,” Lindamood said. “But they do make it faster and easier to communicate with customers. And research has shown that effective communication is the basis of all solid relationships between a business and its customers.”

You can learn more at [www.questline.com](http://www.questline.com).





Photo courtesy of Elk River Municipal Utilities

## Areas for Further Exploration

Several interviewees recommended investigating opportunities to interact with customers on a face-to-face basis: Community events, farmers markets, historic events, high-school athletics, holidays, chili cook-offs, community parades, art festivals and more.

“While people may know what their local utility does, we also strive to communicate who we are and build a more personal connection with those we serve,” said Foss of Elk River Municipal Utilities.

Each year her utility hosts a National Drive Electric Week event at their local farmers market and they participate in a downtown Halloween Trick-or-Treat festival. One year, they dressed up as characters from the “Scooby-Doo” cartoon and decorated a utility bucket truck as the Mystery Machine. This made a memorable impact while handing out candy, glow necklaces, coloring sheets and crayons to local children.

“Face-to-face engagement creates great opportunities to break down barriers,” Foss said. “We are making a concerted effort to have staff at as many community events as possible.”

One community event that interviewees mentioned was Public Power Week, marked each year during the first full week of October. It’s a great opportunity to display utility trucks and other equipment, provide safety demonstrations, showcase electric vehicles, tout environmental projects and generally connect with the community. Some utilities allow visitors to take bucket truck rides, which always draw a lot of interest.



“Don’t try to be a superhero. Be authentic to your community and yourself. You can’t do everything, but you can probably do more than you think if you leverage your resources.”

— **Sheila Corson**  
Public Information Officer,  
*Mason County PUD #3*

## Marketing is a Marathon, Not a Sprint

It can be easy for thinly staffed public power marketers to get overwhelmed by all of the opportunities they have to promote programs, boost their profile in the community and engage with customers. Additionally, Conway Corporation’s Kemp reminds us that it’s just as critical to build bridges internally.

“It’s important for your peers to know what you do and why you do it,” Kemp said. “It takes time and effort, but it can make your job easier over time. And, when you need to have those hard conversations with your peers, that conversation will go much better if you have established positive relations beforehand.”

Similarly, Corson, who has over six years of experience working as a public-power marketer on a small team, also recommends starting small, setting goals, tracking performance and committing to continuous improvement.

“Marketing is a marathon, not a sprint,” she said. “Don’t try to be a superhero. Be authentic to your community and yourself. You can’t do everything, but you can probably do more than you think if you leverage your resources.”

For example, if you want to increase your use of videos, spend some time watching YouTube and Instagram Reels to see what topics gain the most likes and shares. If you want to increase your participation in the community, attend community event meetings as a utility representative. Opportunities and resources abound when you simply take the time to look.

As Corson said, “Part of the marketer’s job is to find unusual places to connect and innovative ways to connect.”





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