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Creating Unlikely Allies

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No Comments



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A recent ad campaign in California created a great deal of buzz. Cindy McCain, wife of AZ Senator and Presidential Candidate John McCain, showed up in an ad opposing California's H8. Regardless of your personal opinion of gay marriage, this proposition had the effect of raising awareness and creating a steady bubble of dialogue. Because of her husband's rejection of gay marriage, Cindy McCain was viewed as an unlikely ally for opponents of H8.

Creating unlikely allies is one way a project, idea or concept can be elevated and gain wider acceptance. People stop and take note because they're thrown off guard by the combination of individuals or groups that are supporting the initiative. As we look forward to the development and implementation of a smart grid or any other major initiatives, it's a healthy idea to consider a list of unlikely allies. What partners should be included in the discussions that might create intrigue and cause others to be surprised by their support?

Utilities are in an excellent place to consider unlikely allies because of their obligation to serve. The responsibilities for planning that stake out transmission pathways 25 years into the future and the designation as supplier of last resort, cause most utility companies to have connections

with a wide range of community leaders, technical professionals and advocacy groups. Establishing a regular forum or methodology that keeps these key individuals and organizations connected to the company can serve as an excellent resource when the plans will benefit from their evangelism.

In a recent rate settlement, APS had more than 20 such groups at the table as interveners and ultimately, parties to the settlement. They ranged from low-income advocacy groups to energy efficient experts and key customers. Was it an odd combination? Yes! And that was absolutely a contributing factor to achievement of the settlement. Others wondered where this diverse group of leaders had found common ground and that resulted in a greater willingness to listen and, in the end, greater acceptance. While this particular group was not established under the guise of finding unlikely allies, the strength of the relationship that existed with each was a crucial component in consensus building. This same model needs to be considered as we create our plans for our smart grid and other major initiatives. Where do we expect opposition to come from? Who wouldn't care about the project? What respected opinions would be valuable? What key leaders need to weigh in?

The powerful responsibility that utilities are carrying for resource planning, renewable and energy efficiency standards and line siting and other projects cuts across a diverse group of stakeholders. Finally, although bringing different groups together for civil discourse and consensus building is valuable in the implementation of key projects, we can't wait until we are at the starting gate to engage. Identifying key stakeholders and providing regular communications can and will provide the entry that may be necessary later. What future project do you have that will benefit from the inclusion of an unlikely ally?

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