

California's Electricity Crisis

*"You can run but you can't hide...
especially if they have your phone number!"*



Claudia Chandler, Communications Director



Energy Crisis Communication

Setting the Stage

- February 2000 — Gasoline and diesel supply problems drove up prices dramatically
- August 2000 — A large natural gas pipeline exploded, doubling prices from \$3 to \$6 per million Btu
- November 2000 — Natural gas prices soared to \$54 per million Btu to California utilities
- January 2001 — First statewide electricity rolling blackouts EVER!
- January to May 2001— 7 rolling blackouts



Key Challenges During the Crisis

Responding in a timely way to the media and public.

- Daily calls to the office increased from 25 to 200+ calls a day at the peak of the crisis.
- Office averaged between 100-250 calls a day for eight months with a dramatic drop off after September 11, 2001.

Responding with accurate, current information.

- Staying current on a rapidly changing, complex situation through briefings with key management and technical staff



Key Challenges During the Crisis

- Public information regarding more than two dozen power plants in the licensing process
- Quality control for government officials' speeches, public appearances, media interviews
- Rumor control and debunking myths in electronic and print media
- Taking the time to develop proactive mechanisms to distribute accurate information
- Responding to other energy supply and price issues in natural gas, gasoline and diesel fuels
- Placing comprehensive, accurate data a on web with supporting fact sheets



Four Main Constituency Groups

- Media
- Public — irate, angry, fearful, how can they help
- Kooks, nuts and inventors
- Government officials and other state agencies



Information responses during the crisis

- Prepared brochures
- Centralized quality control for all electricity facts and data from all state entities
- Established toll free information numbers
- Launched new consumer energy web site
- Added new, targeted electricity web pages
- Placed data and new information on web with supporting fact sheets as new issues occurred



Media's Needs

- International, national, and California media needed basic understanding of electricity system
- Wanted simple, quick answers to a complex problem and changing situation
- Reporters were pressured by editors to write/produce a “daily electricity story”
- Challenged by us to correct inaccuracies, debunk myths and electricity folklore



Public's Needs

- Needed to vent: furious with high natural gas bills and now faced with rolling blackouts — who is to blame!
- Wanted to provide suggestions on how to save electricity
- Concerned about other entities wasting electricity — “snitching”
- Needed information on what to do in a rolling blackout situation — health concerns, unfamiliar with controlled electricity outages



Kooks, Nuts and Inventors

- Seeking funding for miracle “product”
- Great invention, “can’t tell you about it, but it will save the state, world, universe”
- Wasted valuable staff time with their ideas
- Often referred by government official (or so they said)
- Wanted resources— time or money



Responding to Other State and Government Agencies

- Explaining the situation
- Fact-checking data and vetting information for speeches, brochures, opinion editorials
- Serving on “information dissemination task forces”
- Served as the State’s clearinghouse for calls from their constituents



What did we do first?

- Triage to provide accurate information to every group as quickly as possible and preferably through the web.
- Established toll free numbers and trained temporary help to respond to public queries
- Established web pages with specific information written for the lay person
- Established web pages with specific information written for media
- Expanded office hours 7 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. to handle East Coast media and catch up on office workload



Communicating with the media

- Press releases to help consumers save electricity, respond to rolling blackouts — only 90 minutes don't panic!
- Developed Media-only web site with “rip and read” energy tips for radio/weather broadcasters; energy data and graphs; fact sheets on key electricity issues; and hourly electricity supply and demand updates. (Easy to understand is critical)
- Radio actuality line with Q and A format to address key topic of the day
- Telephone call-in news conferences with principals to report on progress in new generation; conservation and renewables.
- Tracked monthly conservation efforts on web with easy to understand analysis



Managing the Calls from the Public

- Established toll free numbers and Energy Ideas web site for public to comment on specific concerns, ideas and abuses
- Recruited and trained staff from other offices to answer toll free lines giving information on energy situation, renewable energy, help with paying they energy bills
- Developed web-based Energy Rebate Database to give consumers information on rebate offered for energy efficient products
- Developed energy tips for electricity conservation and what to do in a rolling blackout; available in print and online
- Pushed up the launch of a new consumer-oriented web site – the Consumer Energy Center



Managing the Calls from Kooks, Nuts and Inventors

- Established Energy Inventions web page with information on programs that fund research and development projects
- Gave contact person and mailing address to send unsolicited proposals



What we did RIGHT in internal communications

- Daily morning briefings with media staff on hot topics
- In-house newspaper clipping service covering all key media markets to keep all staff apprised of news
- Internal fact sheets on power plant information and weekly briefings with technical staff
- Lunch meetings to keep media staff up to date
- Daily media log from each media officer noting key questions and answers circulated to media staff



What we did RIGHT in external communications

- Central spokesperson for all media information
- Maximized the use of web and it is used as a communications tool — not a computer tool
- Topic-specific reporter database with e-mail and fax numbers
- Used PR Newswire, reporter database, and web e-mail list servers to get information out



What we did RIGHT in responding to the media

- Accessible to media – All media phone calls were returned by COB (close of business)
- Provided facts, data and information to the level of their desired understanding — no matter how long it took.
- Always moved reporter or consumer to next level. If we were not the right entity we referred them with a phone number to the correct agency.



What we did RIGHT in responding to the public

- Addressed their need for information on public health and safety and financial need first.
- Established various toll free numbers and trained staff to respond to angry public.
- Coordinated our efforts with other social agencies to help them inform their constituencies (hospitals, care facilities, fragile elderly)
- Used the Energy Ideas “Snitch Line” to pitch fun, consumer stories that focused on energy conservation
- Answered e-mail inquiries within 24-hours, even on weekends



Areas for improvement

- Needed faster response from technical staff with information
- Other energy agencies and utilities off-loaded their phone calls on the Energy Commission rather than answering the callers' questions
- Data changed so rapidly that it was difficult to stay current — developed a biweekly fact sheet with accurate data in all key energy areas
- Burnt people out with lack of time off that culminated in emotional exhaustion of September 11 disaster



Measuring our success

Prior to the Electricity crisis of 2001 we measured our success by how successfully we pitched and placed a story.



Measuring our success

*During the electricity crisis of 2001
we measured our success by:*

- Did the reporter understand the issue after we finished talking with him/her?
- Did every reporter who called get responded to by close of business?
- Did the Commission's position get incorporated into the story accurately?
- Did reporters continue to call back to use us as a resource?
- Did we successfully refer media to our web site as a resource and research tool?
- Did our web site continue to be useful to reporters in researching and writing their story?



Just do it!

