

CHANGING THE ATTITUDES ABOUT ELECTRICITY

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ABSTRACT

In a joint effort SwedEnergy and its member companies challenge the established perception of electricity by changing perspective in their communication activities, making the emotional connection a top priority. Not merely a way of addressing the lack of confidence amongst the general public, it will also empower the customers to become conscious consumers well aware of the key role electricity has in a sustainable society.

BACKGROUND

The unbundling of the Swedish electricity market back in 1996 brought with it expectations of even lower prices at the consumer level. Although prices fell during the first years afterwards, with the new millennia a combination of subsidy programs, taxes, withdrawal of production capacity and market derived price volatility in general resulted in a rise at the consumer level. As this development to a large extent has been attributed the companies within the energy sector, confidence has been severely affected, last years ranking last compared to other sectors.

Ranging back decades, the dominating perspective on energy efficiency has been that the best kWh is the one never used. With increased awareness that we need to mitigate climate change, energy efficiency as a concept almost merged with that of energy savings.



Illustration: Using emotions has proved to be an effective tool of communication. Here: an image of how electric light can help a good nights sleep.

Electricity is also considered to be common goods, part of a society's infrastructure together with fresh air and other utilities such as water. As such, consumers are in

many ways unaware of to which extent they actually use electricity on a daily basis. Lacking in similar way is the knowledge about what the actual electricity cost is for devices and household appliances. Being unprepared of the cost further affects the confidence for the sector.

The only area where customer satisfaction is average or above is delivery reliability within distribution.

A major survey [1] completed during fall 2010 by United Minds confirmed the above mentioned and also found that the attitudes towards electricity is affected by guilty conscience as well as very mixed emotions in general.

That is perhaps understandable considering that only one Swede in three know that Swedish electricity production to 95 percent is fossil free and because of that is climate benign.

But it also means that consumers also to some extent, are unaware of what positive environmental consequences electricity brings forth. For example:

- Geothermal heat pumps that utilise a sustainable energy source in combination with electricity which doesn't add CO₂ to the atmosphere will dramatically change the environmental footprint for a household that previously used oil for heating.
- With an efficiency increase by a factor of three to four, electricity can, substantially, change the environmental impact from the transport sector.

The energy sector has undertaken several joint initiatives to improve the functionality of the market. Examples are implementing uniform standards to identify customers, standardized descriptions of the most common contact situations between the customers and their electricity suppliers and a standardized method for handling all the information that are exchanged between the companies regarding change of deliverance.

For the first time however, the energy sector is now addressing the confidence issues in a joint effort. This collaborative project was initiated through SwedEnergy in September 2011 and will continue until 2017. The long-term goal is to influence public opinion about the use of electricity and its importance for a sustainable society. The project has been named Charge Sweden (Ladda Sverige).

CHANGING THE PUBLIC OPINION

In order to increase confidence for the energy sector the public attitudes towards electricity in general, and use of electricity as an enabler for a sustainable society in particular, must change. The mission is to increase knowledge about electricity among users to an extent where they can utilize it to make active choices in their everyday life. The goal is that by 2017 the users will

- **know** that electricity is produced in a way that is sustainable for society and the environment,
- **feel** that electricity is beneficial, giving value for money and is an enabler for our modern lifestyle and its importance for a sustainable society.
- **make** active and aware energy choices.

The energy sector has a very profound technical culture, being heavy on engineers and technicians. Historically this has also been the case when it comes to communication. For years the energy sector has communicated what is being done; holistic, accurate, very detailed and obviously missing the target.

Customer expectations on quality of deliverance increases as is their discontent over pricing, operations and service levels. As stated earlier low interest affects attitudes. Our conclusion is to use more emotions and experience based argumentation in order to reach out to users and customers, thereby being able to influence their attitudes. This as the human being tends to make rational decisions based on emotional drivers and perception.

Strategy

Changing public opinion is a long-term work. It takes time to alter attitudes and emotions related to a product, a company or a business. SwedEnergy have chosen to address two major aspects, which have great impact on the overall attitude towards electricity; the view on the price level and the view of the personal and societal benefits that comes with using electricity. That the negative aspects of power production override the benefits of using it is a quite common feeling. At the same time, very few are willing to forsake all the personal comfort and life improving aspects made possible by electricity. Instead, when challenged, they refer to improved energy efficiency made possible by technical development to reduce their own use of electricity [2].

The aim is to move from the present perception of electricity as something not only expensive, but also something of an environmental villain, towards a position where electricity is regarded as sustainable and an everyday hero and that the benefits on both a personal and societal level exceed the cost.

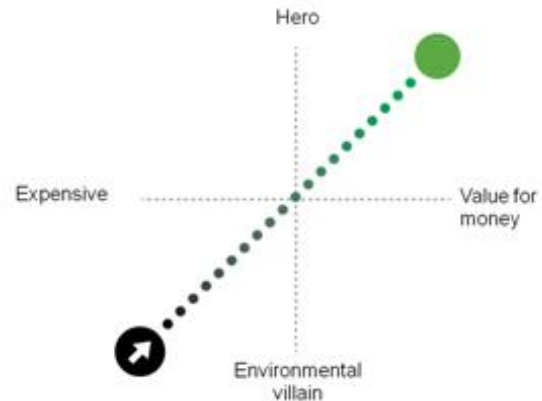


Illustration: Strategic movement in the public opinion.

It's about taking a stand for our product and what it enables in everyday life. This can't, by experience, be accomplished with technical arguments alone. The emotional aspects are necessary to inspire the common user to become a conscious consumer making conscious choices. One part concerns the advantages such as time saving and convenience, but it's also about electricity as an enabler for a sustainable society and life style.

Conscious use doesn't constitute bad conscience. On the contrary it enables the consumer to reflect over their consumption pattern, prioritize and use in the most beneficial way for them; for some leaving the light on during the night is a waste of energy, for those who have a child that fears the dark it is a blessing.

Conscious use will also change the perception of electricity as something, which should be a free commodity towards something with an actual value.

Roles and tools

It is the companies that hold the trust and credibility. Although the customers, to various extent, have confidence in their own power supplier (both grid and power) [3] that is, as stated earlier, not the case in terms of the energy sector as a whole. The participation of the individual companies is therefore crucial.

The role of the membership companies are:

- To engage them into the work, integrating the new ways of communicating into their own operations and day-to-day customer contacts.

In this joint effort SwedEnergy has two distinct roles;

- To take a lead in the public debate together with activities aimed towards the policymaking level and the national media.
- Support to the individual member companies regarding customer communication and

activities aimed at local decision makers and media.

In the latter role the project management aim to create momentum and inspiration among the membership companies through easy-to-use tools, workshops and public reports based on consumer surveys. As the members consists of state-owned, municipal and private sector companies as well as associations of different types, there is also a lot of effort put into spreading good examples and best practices.

Progress is monitored annually through surveys on changes in public opinion regarding our selected statements.

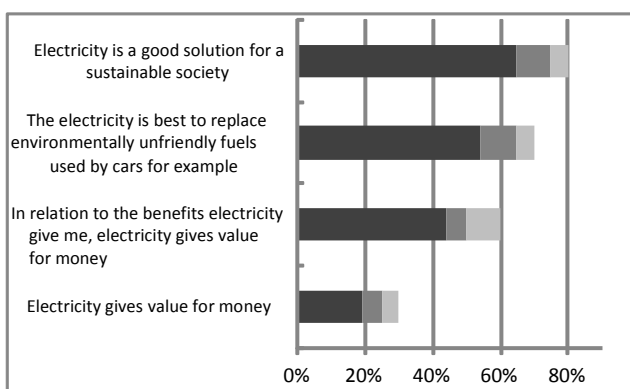


Illustration: Goals set for measuring the achievements regarding movement in the public opinion. Dark grey = result from the first survey in 2011. Grey= goal set for 2015. Light grey = goal set for 2017.

KEY FINDINGS

After the first year we have had the following key findings:

- **Promoting all the upsides of electricity usage stirs up emotions.** SwedEnergy conclusions; to avoid being accused of not taking environmental issues in consideration we have to be very explicit about that there are no contradiction between being pro electricity and being pro energy efficiency and the awareness of that although energy is an abundant resource, the means to harness it is not. Therefore we do stress that there is a natural link between approving of electricity and working for a sustainable development and improved energy efficiency. We also stress the fact that clever and conscious use of electricity is one of the key components in the development of a sustainable society.
- **The kWh term is unknown among most of our customers - Yet it is used as the main communicating theme on our web sites as well as on the electricity bill.** SwedEnergy conclusions; we need to combine, or supplement the concept with measurements in time or


money making it more comprehensible to our customers.

- **Combining facts with emotions is making our communication stick.** SwedEnergy conclusions; always talk about the values that are created by the use of electricity; safety, light, wellness, health, comfort, convenience, time saving etc.
- **Making unexpected comparisons** related to everyday life is working very well. For example calculating and communicating the cost for the power needed to a full year's use of a smart phone. Or how many hours of electricity you can have for the cost of an ice cream. SwedEnergy conclusions; Develop more examples like those being used during the first year.

What do you get for your money?

Ex: using electricity versus buying a Magnum ice cream bar?

- Recharge your cell phone for 168 hours
- + Use your laptop for 46 hours
- + Do 5 loads of laundry with washing machine
- + Keep a LED-lamp on for 2 full weeks
- + AND watch TV for 46 hours
- = SEK 22 is equal to about 15 kWh**



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Illustration: Example of a comparison on what you can use the electricity for equivalent to the cost of an ice cream bar.

Plans for the continuous work

The main focus for 2013 will be to gain further engagement and involvement from our individual member companies.

Another key area will be statistics and information about customers' experience of electricity based commodities and their view on the use and benefits of electricity. The statistics itself needs to be improved as well as its accessibility for member companies.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Impact on the political environment

A positive change regarding attitudes towards electricity will not only affect customer confidence, it could also contribute to a more constructive environment for the energy policy discussion. There have been several reforms since the unbundling of the market, with re-regulations aiming towards empowering the customer. A positive development in it self, but the results have yet offered little in terms of cost benefits for the customers.

Employer branding and recruiting talents

Another long-term effect from improved customer confidence and satisfaction are that it is likely to be easier to attract young people to choose educations relevant to our business. That is not only a pre-requisite for us to be able to recruit young talents over time to ensure sustained quality in the electricity distribution and operations, but also a challenge for all technical sectors..

A change in media coverage

The media coverage of the Swedish energy sector has been very biased during recent years, both reflecting and enhancing public scepticism. Improvements in confidence between all stakeholders will have positive effects.

REFERENCES

- [1] United Minds, 2010, survey: *Svenskarna och elen "Ska man ha dåligt samvete för att man tänder en lampa?"* (carries a quantitative survey, a qualitative survey and a media analysis)
- [2] Svensk Energi, 2012, report: *Ladda Sverige – en studie om svenskarnas syn på el och klimatet.*, 10-11. (Charge Sweden – a study on the view of electricity and climate issue held by the Swedish)
- [3] Ipsos, 2012, survey: *Byten och attityder på den svenska elmarknaden.* (Changes and attitudes on the Swedish power market)