

6.1

Consumer Outreach and Education Programs

As with any relatively new technology on the market, consumers must understand how solar technologies work and what their benefits are. Lack of communication, information dissemination, and consumer awareness can prevent residents and businesses from taking advantage of solar energy. To successfully “sell” solar energy in a community, community leaders must understand consumer perceptions about solar and work to overcome any negative or inaccurate ideas or views. They also need to determine the price or value equation that will have the most appeal, find out who consumers view as credible sources of product information, and decide where to place this information so that it reaches the target audience. Media campaigns, workshops, educational displays, events, competitions, and highly visible demonstration projects are a few examples of outreach activities that can be implemented at the local or regional level to help educate the public about solar technologies. Showcasing existing solar energy installations through an online solar mapping tool is a mechanism that’s growing in popularity (see 6.4, [Solar Mapping as an Outreach Tool](#)). These efforts can help build the solar market by furnishing credible information to increase public awareness and interest in solar technology and financing options.

BENEFITS

Citizens who are educated about the benefits of solar energy and understand financing options and the installation process are more likely to be interested in purchasing and installing solar technologies at their homes or businesses, which increases local demand for solar energy and helps local governments meet solar energy goals.

Implementation Tips and Options

To broaden the market for solar, a community’s marketing strategy should accomplish the following objectives:

- ❑ Check if the state energy office or equivalent state agency has a central consumer information Web portal for residents and businesses. Although local leaders may wish to tailor messages to their local community, they can save money and promote standardization across jurisdictions by building on efforts the state has already undertaken.
- ❑ Explain the value proposition for solar.

- Reinforce in marketing materials the reliability of solar technologies.
- Reduce the complexity of explanations of solar concepts and technologies.
- Include a message that resonates with members of the target audience.
- Reach new customer markets.
- Use the following outreach tactics to accomplish the objectives just listed:
 - Create an informational Web site or a social marketing site.
 - Use Web-based solar mapping as an outreach tool (see 6.4, [Solar Mapping as an Outreach Tool](#)).
 - Publish case studies on existing solar installations.
 - Create educational displays explaining the basics of solar energy (consider making it a mobile exhibit).
 - Train neighborhood solar champions.
 - Organize a solar fair.
- Secure sufficient resources to support all aspects of a robust consumer education campaign. To do this, partner with organizations such as nonprofits, universities, utilities, and companies. Depending on the scope of the program, the necessary resources could include the following:
 - Adequate space to hold workshops or fairs
 - Trained instructors to lead consumer education workshops
 - Staff to update an educational Web site
 - Solar mapping software.

Examples

Knoxville, Tennessee: Educating the Community Through Consumer Workshops

One of the biggest obstacles to the growth of the solar market in the city of Knoxville is that most citizens lack information about, and experience with, solar technology. To help educate its citizens, the city hosts a series of free solar energy workshops that are open to the public. Participants learn about different solar technologies, the various incentives for purchasing solar systems, and how to find qualified installers such as those certified by the North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners (NABCEP). Individual workshops focus on different segments of the population (e.g., residents, businesses, utilities), and each workshop is tailored for the appropriate audience. Workshops have been taught in the past by faculty at Pellissippi State Community College (PSCC) and faculty from the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy (SACE). SACE generally teaches informational workshops and PSCC has given a few classes that qualify participants for continuing education credits and preparation for the NABCEP entry level exam. The workshops and related consumer information are promoted through the city's Solar Knoxville Clearinghouse, available online at www.solarknoxville.org.

Portland, Oregon: Reaching the Community Through the Solar Now! Campaign

One of the four major goals set by the city of Portland's Solar Now! program is increasing market demand among local residents and businesses. The city's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS) has a long history of supporting community outreach, education, training, technical assistance, and customer service, and engaging in creative public-private partnerships that further the mission. Its outreach efforts have played an important role in fostering the sort of community-wide behavior change that has made Portland one of the most sustainable cities in the nation.

The city of Portland identified the Oregon Department of Energy, Energy Trust of Oregon, and Solar Oregon as critical partners in achieving the city's goal of increasing market demand for solar. Each partner plays an important and distinct role in the existing solar market. BPS became involved to help better facilitate and unify the independent efforts. The organizations all came together under the Solar Now! brand, and work to educate the residential and commercial public to market the benefits of solar energy. The Solar Now! campaign has used the following outreach methods:

- Free workshops
- Advertising campaigns to attract attendance to workshops and raise awareness of the Solar Now! program
- Educational brochures for residential and commercial audiences
- Informational Web site (www.solarnoworegon.org)
- A toll-free call center
- E-mail reminders and notifications sent to workshop attendees
- Table presence at local farmers' markets, fairs, and festivals
- On-site presentations at workplaces.

The partnership has enabled Portland to leverage finances as well as skills, resulting in a well-coordinated campaign that's increasingly recognized by the public. As of July 2010, residential solar had grown dramatically, with a 325% increase in the number of systems installed since the campaign started in 2006.

Visit www.solaramericacommunities.energy.gov for more inspiring examples from communities across the United States. 

Additional References and Resources

WEB SITES

ASES National Solar Tour

www.nationalsolartour.org

The American Solar Energy Society (ASES) National Solar Tour is the world's largest grassroots solar event. This event offers participants the opportunity to tour homes and buildings to see how neighbors are using solar energy, energy efficiency, and other sustainable technologies to reduce their monthly utility bills and help tackle climate change. It takes place each year in conjunction with National Energy Awareness Month.

California Solar Center

www.californiasolarcenter.org

Californiasolarcenter.org is a prime source of information on solar energy activity in California, and much of the information is applicable to every state. The Web site is managed by The Rarus Institute, a nonprofit organization working to promote greater use of renewable energy through education, research, and program and policy development. This site includes chat rooms, educational resources, and information on financial incentives in California and legislation. The goal is to disseminate timely and accurate information to help develop the market for solar energy technology and design practices in California and to encourage consumers, businesses, and policy makers to move toward a clean energy future without compromising the environment or the economy.

EnergySavers.gov: Exploring Ways to Use Solar Energy

www.energysavers.gov/renewable_energy/solar/index.cfm/mytopic=50011

The U.S. Department of Energy's Energy Savers Web site provides information for consumers on how to leverage energy efficiency and renewable energy to save money on household energy bills. In this section, Energy Savers explains how consumers can harness solar energy for various applications around the home.

Florida Solar Energy Center: Consumer

www.fsec.ucf.edu/en/consumer/solar_electricity

The Florida Solar Energy Center (FSEC) Solar Energy Department has researched PV for more than 30 years. The consumer's section of the Web site helps consumers understand how to use PV in their homes and businesses.

PUBLICATIONS

Smart Solar Marketing Strategies: Clean Energy State Program Guide

Clean Energy Group and SmartPower, August 2009

Effective marketing guides the presentation of product information consumers, with the ultimate goal of persuading consumers to make a particular purchase. This guide explains the classic elements of marketing and the lens they offer for assessing programs that support solar technology deployment. It also identifies market barriers facing solar and how marketing strategies can be used to overcome them.

Report: www.cleangroup.org/Reports/CEG_Solar_Marketing_Report_August2009.pdf