



## Seattle City Light Customer Survey

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**JUNE 2011**

#### **Introduction & Research Objectives**

In May 2011, Alison Peters Consulting completed a statistically valid telephone survey of 500 residential customers of Seattle City Light. The project was sponsored by the utility as an initial assessment of the attitudes and opinions held by customers with regard to service priorities and communication techniques. More specifically, the study was completed to answer the following questions:

- *Are customers satisfied with reliability and with City Light's response to residential outages?*
- *What are customers doing to reduce energy consumption and would customers consider new actions to reduce energy use?*
- *What are customers' current program and service priorities?*
- *How can City Light communicate effectively with its customers?*

#### **Research Methodology**

Customers were contacted by phone to participate in the research project. Overall, the demographics of the respondents (i.e. their age, gender and geography) very closely matched the demographic profile of City Light's residential service area.

A margin of error of approximately +/- 4.5 percentage points is associated with the study. The telephone poll was approximately 11 minutes in length.

#### **Key Findings**

##### **CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: RELIABILITY AND RESPONSE**

- Seattle City Light is known generally as the local power provider for the region, and most customers don't associate the utility with any of its specific initiatives such as "conservation." Customers do not automatically associate "City Light" with their monthly electricity rates.
- Almost 60 percent of customers have not had an outage in the last year. Almost 90 percent of customers say it's acceptable to lose power once or twice.
- However, after the second outage, 51 percent say it is not acceptable. Satisfaction declines quickly after a homeowner has lost power the third time.

##### **CONSERVATION EFFORTS**

- 37 percent of customers rate their conservation behaviors between an 8 to 10 on a 10 point scale (10 is high, the most energy efficient someone can be). Another 54 percent say their behavior is in the middle, between a 4 to 7.
- The most energy efficient subgroup, aka The "Super" Conservationists (those rating themselves 8-10) were more likely to use compact florescent bulbs, minimize water

consumption, turn off lights to save energy and do full loads of laundry. Mainstream customers (those rating themselves 4-7) and The “Super” Conservationists” were both likely to have energy efficient appliances, turn down the heat to reduce energy and unplug appliances.

## SERVICE PRIORITIES

- When it comes to program priorities, customers are committed to conservation programs and purchasing clean energy. The majority of customers will also support subsidies for low-income residents who need assistance with their bill.
- Over 60 percent of customers do not want to pay more for City Light to improve customer service or improve its web site. Instead, customers want City Light to reduce outages (thereby eliminating the need for customer service calls or searching City Light’s web site) and will pay more for these services, including tree trimming, infrastructure and new technology.

## Conclusions

Seattle City Light is now beginning the public involvement phase of its Strategic Plan process. With this in mind, some of the following conclusions from the survey can provide some shape to future public meetings or even prompt further discussion into new areas the survey did not cover.

1. CUSTOMERS ARE WILLING TO GIVE FEEDBACK: Forty-three percent of customers said they would like to be contacted via email about giving feedback or research related to City Light’s strategic plan.
2. PEOPLE CARE ABOUT RELIABILITY: There is a great deal of interest and support for City Light to invest in projects that improve reliability. To that end, tree-trimming programs and infrastructure upgrades are examples of initiatives that would engage the majority of customers right now.
3. CONSERVING ENERGY IS A VALUE-ADD FOR MANY CUSTOMER GROUPS: There are many motivations for customers to reduce their energy use. Middle income households are interested in how they can make the most out of their budget while some subgroups are interested in projects that are innovative like Community Solar or have a “cool factor.”
4. TEXT MESSAGES ARE AN EFFECTIVE TOOL DURING OUTAGES: We are learning just how popular and effective text messaging can be during a power outage or emergency. To be prepared to reach your customer base, existing and new customers need to be asked for their mobile phone numbers.
5. RATES ARE NOT THE DOMINANT DYNAMIC: In fact, upwards of 70 percent of customers would pay more to help those in need with their monthly bill. Asking an open-ended question about City Light did not result in a negative emotional backlash regarding rates or future rate increases.
6. THERE IS OPPORTUNITY TO EXPAND AUTOMATIC BILL PAY: New people would sign up if they knew about it, the process was convenient and it saved them time each month. Those who are resistant to paying any bills online, computer novices and homeowners with inconsistent monthly income are not good prospects for this program.
7. EXPANDING AUTOMATIC BILL PAY MAY HELP SUPPORT CITY LIGHT’S PROGRAM PRIORITIES: There is a high return on investment to expand the automatic bill pay program.