

By Dennis Wolf, MTAS Fire Management Consultant

Under Section 1032 of the rating schedule, ISO will award credit for the “effectiveness of the residential fire safety program on the **percentage of the entire community population** [my emphasis] **reached**.” The calculation of the credit is simple: total population ÷ percent of population reached x 10 points. Using Murfreesboro as an example:

Murfreesboro’s population is 108,755. If the fire department can document through measured attendance figures (such as attendance at school presentations, speaking engagements, station tours, training classes, smoke alarm installations, and other programs where attendance can be measured) or reasonably accurate estimates (such as a fire department booth at a public event, safety stand-by at a public event, etc.), that they reached 25,300 people, the credit would be determined as follows:

$25,300 \text{ population} \div 108,755 = 23.26\% \text{ of population reached, } \times 10 \text{ points} = 2.33 \text{ points credit.}$

In some communities, the fire department puts a safety insert in the monthly utility bill mailing. This may happen once a year, or more often. ISO is reluctant to grant much credit for this under the assumption that most people throw those away without reading them. “Most people” is not “all people:” some people do read those inserts, and your fire department should get some credit for this if you insert valid safety messages in mailings to your residents. The question is, how much credit should you receive?

Empirical research, as shown in the included articles, reveals a reading rate of between 34% and 61%, with the actual quoted numbers being 34%, 38%, 47%, 59%, and 61%.

Therefore, this research gives the fire chief some data to counter the statement that “most people don’t read those” and advocate for some credit. How much credit will need to be discussed with the ISO field analyst at the time of the evaluation. It will be very helpful if your community has done its own research on how many people read the inserts. If you do not have local data, then use the range of 34% to 61% as a starting point for the discussion. How much difference will it make? Using the Murfreesboro example, and the lowest estimate of 34%, let’s see.

Murfreesboro’s population = $108,755 \times 34\% = 36,977$.

Population reached through programs: 25,300

Population reached through inserts: 36,977

Total population reached: $62,277 \div 108,755 = 57.26\% \text{ of population reached, } \times 10 \text{ points} = 5.73 \text{ points credit, an increase of 3.4 points}$

Conclusion

Fire safety information applies to everyone and is of interest to all residents. To improve community safety, use utility bill inserts, and other mailings, to reach more of your community's population with fire safety messages, and be prepared to ask ISO for the associated credit.

THE RIGHT STUFF: WHEN AND HOW TO MAKE BILL INSERTS EFFECTIVE

By Betsy Loeff, contributing writer

09/28/2007

<https://www.elp.com/articles/2007/09/the-right-stuff-when-and-how-to-make-bill-insertseffective.html>

Tell the truth: Do you read the newsletters and inserts that come with your utility bills? Or do you open the mail over a trashcan, ready to pitch anything that isn't an actual bill?

Many people never even glance at billing inserts, which makes you wonder just how much benefit stuffers deliver. Not surprisingly, some utility professionals think they're over-valued. Others swear by them, saying there are ways to make inserts pay a respectable return on investment.

To stuff or not to stuff

Until recently Sherrie Austin was energy sector vice president for Market Strategies International (MSI), a research and consulting group. In that capacity, she interviewed plenty of utility customers, and she estimates that **somewhere around 50 percent of them read the various add-ins that come with a utility bill.**

"Compared to direct mail, the utility has built-in relevance," she says. "People are thinking, 'Oh, I have to pay these people.' There's a relationship already established."

You won't get agreement on that 50-percent readership figure from Jim Norton, vice president of Exstream Software, a provider of enterprise document-automation software solutions. He has seen studies that indicate **some 66 percent of people *don't* read bill stuffers,** although he admits this figure is not utility-specific. It cuts across numerous industries.

Even if people are glancing at the stuffers, are they giving them any thought? Norton doesn't think so.

"When a customer gets a piece of mail, if it's a bill or statement, they definitely look at it. But, you have only 42 seconds to capture their attention," according to research he has read.

Because billing insert readership is suspect, Norton is a firm believer in "transpromo" documents, which he says are all the rage among consumer-products companies. They're catching on at utilities, too.

Hot stuff

Transpromo is a newly coined term combining the words "transactional" and "promotional," Norton explains. That is, a bill or statement is a transactional document, vs. some direct-marketing piece designed to sell you something, that's promotional.

These days, "most companies, instead of putting bill stuffers in the envelope, are putting messages directly on the bill," he says.

At Salt River Project (SRP), a Phoenix-based electric and water utility, marketing manager Heidi Schaefer does both. The beauty of a bill insert vs. an on-bill message, she says, is that you can catch a reader's attention with color and graphics in a bill insert. Bills themselves give you little more than space and type to use in conveying your message.

Schaefer adds that many subjects are inappropriate for the bill. For example, sometimes her company sponsors events and negotiates reduced ticket prices for customers. "That information we would not put on a bill," she says.

But, Schaefer uses bill inserts to push special offers, because "to me, bill inserts are more prominent than on-bill messages," she says. **Stuff to know**

SRP is a utility with in-house printing production capabilities, so billing inserts cost Schaefer less than a half-cent each, provided she doesn't go over post office weight requirements. Utilities that are paying a little more might be interested in some pointers to make bill stuffers pay off.

Jon Miller is an executive at Flynn Wright Advertising, a Des Moines, Iowa-based, agency with enough fingers in the utility pie that Miller judged a recent billing-inserts competition conducted by the Utility Communicators International trade group. He says utilities do better when they take on the role of supporter or educator.

"Nobody knows how to read the bill. Nobody really understands the industry. If a utility can be seen as an advocate for consumers, that tone plays well," he adds.

Hot topics are important to understand, too. According to Miller, rates are the No. 1 issue consumers want to hear about. MSI's Austin concurs. When her company surveyed consumers, "they always wanted ways to save money," she notes.

Environmental topics grab readership, as well, Miller and others say. Consumers are interested in reducing their carbon footprints.

And, Exstream's Norton will tell you that personalization is vital, too. SRP's Schaefer agrees.

"For different customers, 'green' means different things," she explains. With some, the promise of environmental impact is the draw that prompts energy-saving efforts. Others are more motivated by saving the kind of green that goes in your wallet, she notes.

Schaefer segments customers according to demographics, psychographics and other characteristics, and she produces up to six personalized inserts each month. "People are so bombarded with information," she notes. "We have to be selective in what we offer them."

Her approach certainly seems to be effective. SPR reports that 47 percent of customers read "all or most" of their billing inserts, and 61 percent read the small newsletter that also goes out with bills.

Betsy Loeff has been freelancing for the past 14 years from her home in Golden, Colo. She has been covering utilities for almost four years as a contributor to AMRA News, the monthly publication of the Automatic Meter Reading Association.

Copyright © 2007-2018 PennWell Corporation, Tulsa, OK. All Rights Reserved.

The consumer's energy analysis environment

Willett Kempton & Linda L. Layne

[https://doi.org/10.1016/0301-4215\(94\)90145-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0301-4215(94)90145-7)

Bill inserts

Most US utilities periodically include preprinted inserts with their monthly bill, some of which include energy conservation information. Many people look at the inserts (38% said they always read them and 59% said they sometimes read them), but some respondents volunteered that they were of less interest because they are not house specific and the information may not apply to them.