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SECTION

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Business

Power PR

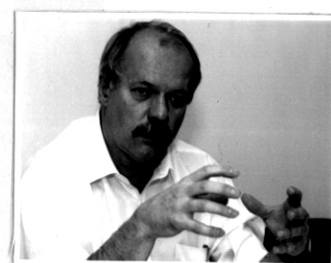
For Central Maine Power, the ice storm was the public relations challenge of all time, and observers say the utility scored well

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David Flanagan
CMP president

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For Mark Ishkanian, the televised images of crumpled steel transmission towers in Quebec was his first hint that Maine was about to face a natural disaster.

That was Jan. 6. Two days later, Ishkanian rose before dawn and drove from his Readfield home, the world glistening in his car headlights, to Central Maine Power headquarters in Augusta.

“I couldn't sleep any longer,” recalls Ishkanian, CMP's manager of corporate communications. “I knew we were in for deep trouble.”

As Mainers awoke in dark, cold homes, radio stations began running ads featuring David Flanagan, CMP's president. It was the first inkling some residents, tuned in via battery power, got of the scope of the disaster.

“If we work together and look out for each other, we'll get through this,” Flanagan told anyone who could hear him.

The ice storm that put unprecedented pressure on CMP to restore power also tested as never before the utility's ability to communicate with its customers, and a public hungry for storm-related news. It was a public relations challenge, some observers say, without parallel in Maine.

“This was kind of like World War II and Pearl Harbor,” says Brenda Garrand of Garrand & Co., a Portland advertising and public relations firm. “It had an immediate, catastrophic impact on life as we know it. I don't know if there's ever been anything that has had this impact.”

CMP's communications strategy focused on three themes: Safety, patience and information.

The efforts fell short for

thousands of people, who went two weeks without heat, water and lights. Many were frustrated, and some truly angry, by a lack of specific information about when their power would return.

But despite some shortcomings, CMP is getting high marks for crisis communications, according to observers in the media, advertising and public relations. And with hindsight, CMP says, it learned some lessons that might help it communicate better in future outages.

Like most utilities, CMP has a plan for communicating during power outages. The goal is to update customers, especially by radio, with information on the outage and progress to restore power. The last big test of the plan was in 1991, following Hurricane Bob.

But the ice storm presented challenges never before experienced in Maine.

Most outages are confined to certain areas. This outage was systemwide. Even CMP's headquarters in Augusta lost power. Nearly half of the building's employees lost electricity at home, including Flanagan and Ishkanian.

Radio plays a key role in a public emergency. But this storm cut power or crippled antennas at many stations. Maine Public Radio, a statewide information source, was off the air early in the storm.

Most storms strike hard and subside. This storm was a disaster in slow motion, with wind and falling trees creating new outages after the storm was long gone.

Recurring trouble, coupled with the sheer scope of the damage, made it nearly impossible to predict when power would be restored to certain areas, no less individual homes. Yet, that's what people were desperate to know.

CMP tried to gather and

convey information in several ways.

It made sure its chief executive, Flanagan, was visible and accessible. Viewers able to watch television saw him in the community, clad in work clothes, talking with customers.

Next to Flanagan, Ishkanian emerged as CMP's voice of the ice storm. His updates became a daily fixture on radio and television.

Four times a day, beginning at 6 a.m., Ishkanian sat in on conference calls with operations managers representing CMP's 11 service areas. They summarized the damage and the progress. But managers in the field, he says, were unable in the first days of the cleanup to be specific.

CMP's four-person public relations department was forced to devise a primer on how to rebuild a utility distribution system. The repeated message was biggest pieces first: start with major lines, then hook up entire neighborhoods, followed by streets, finally individual homes.

It's like plowing snow, Ishkanian said over and over. There's no use clearing a side street if the highway's still blocked.

That didn't satisfy frustrated customers.

Ishkanian recalls a man on a radio call-in show. If he knew his home would be dark for 10 days, he said, he would have bought a generator. Ishkanian replied: What if we said 10 days, you invested in a generator, and power was restored in two days?

“The real challenge for me,” Ishkanian recalls, “was how to provide reliable information that people could plan around, when I didn't have that.”

By last weekend, CMP began to narrow down the damage and was able to give more specific time estimates. In hindsight, Ishkanian says, he wishes he had pushed harder to get that level of detail earlier on.

“What I needed to tell people,” he says, “is, ‘based on what we know now, you live on so-and-so circuit, and you'll get power back in three to four days.’”

A human voice

Another lesson, Ishkanian says, is that the method of reporting outages needs some refinement.

CMP relies on a computer-automated answering system in the Midwest. It worked as planned, answering a total of 500,000 calls.

But except in an emergency, people must leave their CMP account numbers on an answering machine. Some customers won't do that, he says. They want to explain their plight to a human voice.

“They don't trust that punching in a 13-digit number will tell CMP that they don't have power,” he says.

The system apparently didn't work for Judy MacLean of Raymond.

Raymond called CMP as soon as her home lost her power. A few days later, she called the company again. A few days after that, she called once more.

MacLean said she was upset that no one ever acknowledged her call or let her know how long her family might be without power.

“I guess I wouldn't want to pay someone just to answer the phone,” she said. “But like everyone else, I wanted to know how long we'd be out. And it would have been nice to have a real person who could tell me.”

While customers were most concerned with lack of power, CMP's overriding worry was that someone would be killed by a live wire.

On Jan. 13, CMP ran full-page newspaper ads showing two line workers wrestling with a downed power pole in Augusta. The headline read: “Be safe. Together we'll make it through.” By

chance, the ad space had been bought earlier to announce the sale of CMP's power plants to FPL Group of Florida. That landmark event suddenly became old news.

CMP feared frustrated citizens would try to help by moving wires. With radio and newspaper ads, it hammered away at a familiar message, one that sunk into the consciousness of many Mainers - “No line is safe to touch.”

In an odd turn of events, CMP's safety message was undermined three days later by the vice president of the United States. While visiting workers in Auburn, Al Gore helped tug a utility cable from beneath a brush pile, a scene captured by newspaper and television cameras.

Aware of the shots, CMP called media outlets and asked them not to print or broadcast that image. Some did show the scene, but warned that the public shouldn't follow Gore's example.

Curtis Mildner, CMP's vice president for retail sales and marketing, says he was upset by the incident. But it had a silver lining. So many people commented on Gore's misstep, Mildner says, that it validated CMP's efforts.

“That meant our message was getting out there,” he says.

No-win situation

Safety aside, CMP's biggest challenge was to soothe powerless customers.

Garrand, the public relations consultant, says it was a task CMP couldn't really win. People say they want accurate information, but what they really want, she says, is to hear that their home is about to be turned back on.

“The challenge CMP faced,” she says, “was providing excellent information, but not making promises they couldn't keep. The worst thing you

can do is make promises you can't keep.”

News reporters, too, wanted more specific information. Irwin Gratz, president of the Maine Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, says he pressed CMP for details about where crews were being deployed. A producer at Maine Public Radio, Gratz says listeners were calling the station to ask for more details, and he wishes he could have provided them.

Gratz says: “I would have liked to say, ‘70 percent of the crews are in Augusta, so if you live in Alfred, don't look for them today.’”

But Gratz gives CMP high marks for access. Calls were always returned quickly.

“In radio,” he says, “we have multiple deadlines every day. I never had problems raising them for my deadline.”

CMP's media response was also followed closely by Dick Dyer of Dyer Associates, a Winthrop public relations firm.

Dyer, who helped coordinate communications for the state following devastating floods in 1987, says he was impressed by Flanagan's performance in the media. Flanagan did a good job of conveying the sense that he was in charge, Dyer says, and taking steps to solve the crisis. At the same time, Flanagan acknowledged the stress, anger and frustration that customers were feeling.

“When people are literally outraged by what they are experiencing,” he says, “it's important to recognize that.”

As the crisis ebbs, it remains unclear how CMP will be regarded by its customers after the last homes get their power back. One challenge will be to calm disgruntled customers who received their monthly electric bills in the mail, even while they waited for power.

Ishkanian says the bills contain a written message. They are estimates and will be adjusted next month.

