

Energy information session empowers rural women in business

Background

To encourage energy efficiency actions in any stakeholder segment it is important to provide energy education so that informed decisions by individuals can be made. That education necessarily needs to cover all aspects of energy flow and use together with the impacts of that use whether it be an environmental, social or financial impact. All decisions regarding energy use ultimately have an impact on efficiency either at an individual level or at the broader electricity network level which will ultimately impact businesses and their potential sustainability.

To successfully deliver Energy Efficiency information to urban and rural businesses across the vast Queensland Murray-Darling Basin, as a first step it was important to identify the key business decision maker segments and to then engage them appropriately being cognisant of decision drivers and barriers to change. Queensland Murray-Darling Committee's existing close working relationship with the businesses across the region provided the project team with the knowledge that women are sometimes the decision makers for energy and other resource related aspects of running a business. Anecdotally, while decisions relating to energy choices made by these businesswomen are driven by concerns relating to financial, social and environmental impacts to varying degrees, significant droughts and floods impacting the region over a number of recent years has raised the importance of the financial impact of decisions. These are currently deemed to be far more important than social and environmental concerns.

The workshop

An interactive energy information session was staged as part of a 'Naturally Resourceful' workshop in Millmerran in southern Queensland, on March 28, 2013.

This activity received funding from the Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism as part of the Energy Efficiency Information Grants Program. The views expressed herein are not necessarily the views of the Commonwealth of Australia, and the Commonwealth does not accept responsibility for any information or advice contained herein.



Above: Some of the women attending the Naturally Resourceful workshop in Millmerran in March 2013

The workshop was designed to empower rural women who are the business decision makers, and was attended by 20 women involved in rural and pastoral pursuits as well as home-based businesses such as cake decorating.

The steadily rising cost of electricity was a significant concern to the attendees and the workshop provided a wide range of energy information including: ways to reduce energy use without going without; maximising opportunities to access cheaper off-peak/time of use tariffs which provides energy efficiency gains to the electricity network and potentially reduces the pressure on future price increases; and discussion around the opportunities available for alternative renewable energy.

As the rising financial impost of electricity bills was the attendees primary concern it was important to ensure that the participants understood their usage and the charges relating to that use. To assist this process participants were asked to bring along a copy of their electricity account so that discussion could focus on electricity usage for each business.



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Opportunities

General information relating to the electricity tariffs and service charges available to these regional consumers was provided so that participants could ascertain whether their current usage pattern could be altered to take advantage of cheaper off-peak or time of use tariffs and by so doing improve the energy efficiency of the local electricity network by helping to flatten the electricity load profile. High peak loads within the network create inefficiencies resulting in the need for energy distribution companies to build more infrastructure, which pushes up electricity prices further.

Electricity-use discussions provided the group with general behavioural tips to reduce energy use, including air-conditioning and lighting use. As part of this discussion energy audits provided by the project were offered to participants to allow the business managers to understand accurately the current energy use and the opportunities available to reduce energy use and improve efficiencies.

Embedded renewable energy options currently available were discussed as it is recognised that “owning” generation together with the *visual* reminders, such as solar photovoltaic installations, of energy and its issues are particularly useful in encouraging and influencing positive energy efficiency attitudes and behaviours. Embedded generation is recognised as assisting electricity network efficiency by reducing line losses occasioned by large distances between the generation site and the consumer, particularly in Queensland with its vast long line network.

Measures implemented

The majority of participants attended the meeting with limited prior knowledge of the information provided by their energy account and how to interpret it. For this reason a greater amount of time during the workshop was ultimately provided to ensure the participants were appropriately informed. Information provided will ensure that they will use their energy account as a regular update of energy use and as a tool for monitoring energy efficiency improvements.

Future workshops with business stakeholder segments will factor in additional time for understanding and interpreting energy use via the business electricity account information.

Outcome

Some of the participants, now confident in their knowledge of their energy use, indicated they will discuss tariff change options with their electricity provider in order to reduce their own costs while assisting network energy efficiencies if they are able to move some of their use away from peak times.

As a result of the offer of energy audits to individual businesses 10 participants took up the opportunity to have their business’ energy usage reviewed via this project service.

General energy use recommendations were provided to each business based on the information provided by the business owners at the workshop. If implemented these actions could result in considerable energy use reductions and customer savings.

The participants will be contacted later in the project to provide feedback to the project team on the long-term effectiveness of the workshop and which if any of the recommendations were implemented effectively and to what extent.

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