

Partner Integration Drives Innovation

By Tim Blodgett

Hometown Connections was formed in 1998 with the idea of providing discounts to public power by aggregating our purchasing strength. This idea remains just as valid today as it did 13 years ago. Due to tight municipal budgets and performance pressures, Hometown Connections remains committed to securing national discount pricing for APPA members on utility products and services from leading industry vendors. Moreover, as the pace of improvements in information technology and distribution automation accelerates, Hometown Connections is playing a pivotal role in fostering cooperative relationships among our technology vendor partners.

Throughout the year, our personnel work directly with each vendor to coordinate greater integration of their technologies with each other. We designed our suite of metering, SCADA, outage management systems, data management, and cyber security products to work together. Utilities know their investments in new systems will remain secure, due to open interfaces between products and a cooperative spirit among our vendors.

For example, Elster and Survalent Technology offer a voltage reduction solution. The meters can provide real-time, end-of-line voltage information and the SCADA system can regulate the line voltages. Survalent has a long history of communicating with the engineering analysis and OMS from Milsoft Utility Solutions. The SCADA system can automatically notify the OMS of trouble, enabling dispatchers to get crews out to the right locations and information out to customers more quickly. N-Dimension Solutions works closely with Survalent and the other vendors to address the cyber security needs of their deployments. Furthermore, the next-generation meter data management system from ElectSolve Technology Services provides an integration platform for all of the disparate utility information systems such as AMI, AMR, SCADA, CIS, OMS, EA/GIS, demand response, and distribution line management. ElectSolve's software integra-

tion capabilities can enable a utility to gather and interpret in one place the data collected throughout the distribution system.

Another priority for Hometown Connections this year has been to explore ways that a service or solution can be aggregated among multiple utilities in a region to provide continued high value at lower costs. This may be as simple as a joint action agency aggregating interest among their members for something like the Energy Depot suite of online audits, or market research through SDS Research. Hometown Connections has conducted its Organization Check Up with each member of the Alabama Municipal Electric Authority and the Piedmont Municipal Power Agency in South Carolina. The staff is currently working with members of Missouri River Energy Services and American Municipal Power. In each of these cases, the agency has elected to underwrite a portion of the Hometown Connections fees. Or aggregation could come in the form a hosted software solution residing on a central server, providing complete functionality at a fraction the cost. All of our partners with software applications are actively engaged in offering hosted solutions.

The "Strategic Power Placement" (SPP) human resource service from Hometown Connections and Mycoff, Fry & Prouse is also a natural fit for the joint action agency structure. For instance, ElectriCities of North Carolina (ENC) is offering SPP to its members for the temporary assignment of retired utility professionals. As developed by MF&P and Hometown Connections, SPP finds retired personnel to fill critical gaps in technical and management skills at public power utilities on an interim basis. ElectriCities members have the option of accessing SPP personnel through a professional services agreement between ElectriCities and SPP or contracting with SPP directly.

Tom Resh of the Altairius Consulting Group has teamed up with Mycoff, Fry & Prouse on many projects, helping municipal utilities find professionals able to tackle a

specific problem, manage a new project, or mentor the permanent staff. "Burbank, Calif., Water & Power needed a principal engineer on a temporary basis," Resh said. "Carl Mycoff arranged for a retired vice president of engineering at a large municipal system—someone used to supervising more than 600 people—to take the assignment, and he loved it. Whatever skill set or experience is needed, Carl and his team can find the right person, and often within a couple of days. And through the sharing of knowledge and strategies with the permanent staff, the SPP service provides an excellent form of succession planning."

Milton Lee, recently retired as chief executive officer for CPS Energy in San Antonio, Texas, has completed his first SPP assignment, helping the city of Boulder, Colo., explore forming a municipal electric system. "The Mycoff team knows virtually all of us who began our public power careers in the 1970s and 80s," he said. "We focused our professional lives around two primary issues: the reliability of the electric system and how our decisions would impact the costs incurred by our customers. Carl and his colleagues know our skills, our preferences, and who would fit best within a specific utility culture. Every utility has issues ranging from A to triple Z, and the SPP service knows who to place where."

For Hometown Connections, it's an exciting time. We are evolving into a one-stop resource for public power systems eager to improve utility operations and customer service through integrated information systems. We have the people and products in place to make extraordinary contributions to the public power community. ■

Tim Blodgett is president and chief executive officer of Hometown Connections.