

Talking Safety

Vermont Gas shares its strategies for helping customers use natural gas safely.

THE NATURAL GAS INDUSTRY has always been a strong advocate for helping homeowners and businesses use natural gas safely. From including safety messages in bill inserts to speaking at community events, natural gas utilities' proactive approach to spreading the word about safety has contributed to the industry's outstanding safety record.

However, successfully communicating safety practices can present a significant challenge. At Vermont Gas, a lot of strategic thinking goes into the design and placement of our safety messages. We also place considerable importance on interfacing with the media to broaden the reach of

our communications. How have we created messages and tools that will best serve our customers?

Our first step has been to consider all employees to be members of our safety team, starting with our CEO and including operations personnel in the field, customer service representatives who answer the phone, marketing staff who sign up new customers and, of course, our safety manager. Everyone works together to help develop, refine and communicate our safety messages to customers.

Our Key Safety Messages

Vermont Gas disseminates a variety of safety messages. While every one is important, we tend to focus on six key points:

- 1 **Know** how to detect and respond to a gas leak.
- 2 **Call** Dig Safe before you dig.
- 3 **Keep** gas appliances in good working condition.
- 4 **Install** a carbon monoxide (CO) detector.
- 5 **Keep** meters clear of snow and ice.
- 6 **Keep** sidewall vents clear of snow.

A strong focus on core points produces higher awareness of the most critical messages. Customer surveys show that this strategy has been effective. A recent survey conducted by an independent market research firm showed that 95.8 percent of respondents indicated they are aware that Vermont Gas recommends installing a CO detector in the home, and 88.2 percent are aware of our recommendation to call Dig Safe before digging on their property.

While awareness is important, having a clear call to action is a critical component of our communications. For instance, we

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Vermont Gas encourages regular equipment inspections to identify and correct potential safety hazards.

regularly tell customers how important it is to install CO detectors to guard against CO poisoning. But we also facilitate purchasing these devices. Customers can buy a CO detector from us over the phone, on our web site, at our office—and even at home, from one of our service technicians. The charge won't appear until next month's bill arrives.

Customers' Favorite Formats

Our market research indicates that customers prefer to receive safety

messages (and other communications) from Vermont Gas via:

- » inserts included with their bill,
- » messages printed on the bill and
- » articles in the bimonthly Vermont Gas newsletter.

By asking our customers how they'd prefer to hear from us, we can concentrate our safety communications in formats that are most likely to make an impact. Customers that switch to natural gas from another fuel receive a welcome package that includes all of our safety messages.

Vermont Gas also devotes a large

section of its web site to safety issues. We've collected a vast array of safety information, from preventing gas leaks to dealing with customer-owned buried service lines. In bad weather, "Winter Storm Advisory" flashes on the home page, with a link to information on storm-related hazards and preventive measures.

The web site is becoming an important resource for more and more customers. We refer customers to our web site in almost every communication. It's also an important reference for journalists and for local organizations concerned with emergency response and public safety. In fact, local media outlets have established links to our web site and function as partners in communicating safety messages.

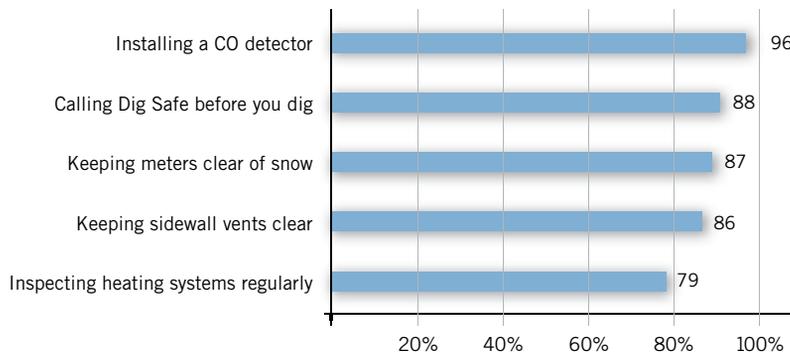
The Real Test: A Blizzard

On Valentine's Day 2007, Burlington, Vt., was buried in two feet of snow—a real test for our safety communications process.

Before the blizzard, we issued a public service announcement (PSA) alerting customers to, among other things, keep clear the sidewall vents on their heating appliance. Blocked

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK FROM A RECENT VERMONT GAS SURVEY

Were you aware that Vermont Gas recommends...



SOURCE: SEPTEMBER 2008 SURVEY CONDUCTED BY JAMES M. SINKULA, PHD, MARKET RESEARCH AND CONSULTING

"We will make Good Products and Sell them Honestly"

These words from our founder, Andrew Young McDonald, speak to the heart of our business philosophy today just as they did over 150 years ago. It's a promise to our customers that we will continue to produce the best quality products and services, and sell them without a lot of gimmicks, hype and empty promises.



A. Y. McDonald Mfg. Co.

GAS VALVES | WATERWORKS | PLUMBING VALVES | PUMPS



800.292.2737 | FAX 800.832.9296 | sales@aymcdonald.com | www.aymcdonald.com

Below: This image helps customers visualize the threat of a blocked sidewall vent.
Right: The Vermont Gas web site gives customers advice on many possible safety issues.



vents can affect the combustion process, which can create carbon monoxide, which could possibly enter the home through nearby openings.

Although all appropriate media outlets received the announcement, very few customers were aware of the problem. When the storm hit, Vermont Gas was inundated with calls from customers whose heating systems weren't working because of blocked sidewall vents. More alarmingly, we received many calls about CO alarms going off in homes.

Despite our communications efforts, we discovered that not all customers knew their heating systems had a sidewall vent, let alone that they should keep it clear of snow.

Over the next few days, we took advantage of the storm to get tremendous publicity for our safety messages. We teamed up with local fire departments, public safety agencies and even the local fuel dealers (our chief competitors!) to pool our resources. All of us, we found, were getting calls about the sidewall vents. In record time, we collaborated to produce and run a



video PSA on the sidewall vent hazard.

This unified message reached not only fuel users, but also representatives of the major local TV station, who were inspired to do their own story. They took footage of homes with sidewall vents that were blocked and interviewed customers, employees and the local fire department about the potential dangers. This story aired on the evening news, one of the highest-rated programs in Vermont.

A warning that comes to customers from a local newscaster has far more impact than an article in a utility newsletter. To measure the impact of the communications effort, we recently conducted a survey and found that 87 percent of respondents were now aware that Vermont Gas recommends keeping sidewall appliance vents clear of snow.

Since the Valentine's Day blizzard, the television station has run the video PSA several times when major snowstorms threatened. We also have developed and inserted into bills a brochure that explains the importance of installing a CO detector.

The Anatomy of a Good Safety Message

We make the assumption that customers want clear, concise messages, visuals to help illustrate key points and a means of acting on the information presented. These are the guidelines we follow when producing a newsletter or a web page. And, in fact, a recent survey shows that more than 70 percent of our customers

consider our communications clear and to the point.

These communications help us achieve measurable results. For example, our seasonal communications on Dig Safe have not only increased customer awareness but also helped reduce dig-ins. Vermont Gas has one of the lowest dig-in rates in the industry.

Another interesting fact from our survey: There's a strong correlation between awareness of our communications and overall satisfaction with our service. In other words, customers who hear what we're saying think more highly of us.

We've found that one of the best ways to help customers use natural gas safely is to encourage them to get a regular inspection of their gas piping, gas appliances and heating system by a qualified technician. Such an inspection helps to ensure the heating system is operating safely and reliably. We tell customers that many potential hazards can be identified and repaired only by a professional. Plus, people who might otherwise ignore a bill insert or newsletter might listen to the advice of a qualified technician!

We've also found that telling customers a message once is not enough. Although there is nothing more important than safety, it's rarely the first thing on a customer's mind. The very reliability of natural gas delivery makes it easy to assume that Old Reliable down in the basement is doing fine. We handle this mindset by delivering our safety messages again and again, varying the words, the visuals and the medium—but not the content.

Visit our web site at www.vermontgas.com to see how we present safety information online. You'll note that some of our ideas come from other AGA member companies. Together, we can create messages and experiences that will benefit us all, including America's 68 million natural gas customers. ♪