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Final Report

Fast Feedback Pilot: Existing Buildings and Production Efficiency Programs

Funded By:

EnergyTrust of Oregon

Prepared By:

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ES EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Energy Trust of Oregon, Inc. (Energy Trust) selected Research Into Action, Inc., to conduct a pilot test of a new approach to collecting rapid feedback from program participants on selected issues and to evaluate different survey methods (paper, telephone, and web-enabled). In the past, respondents to participant surveys have been asked to recall details of program-supported projects that had been completed up to two years before. The pilot test was carried out between July 2009 and January 2010 with participants of Energy Trust's Existing Buildings (EB) and Production Efficiency (PE) programs, which target commercial businesses and industrial facilities, respectively. The primary research questions were whether and how the various methods affect completion rates and responses to the survey questions.

METHOD

Each month, projects that were completed or near completion were assigned to one of three survey methods. All EB projects and those PE projects that did not require on-site verification were randomized to either the phone or web survey method. Only PE projects requiring on-site verification were assigned to the paper survey condition: implementation staff delivered incentive checks to those project owners near the time of project completion, and providing a paper version of the survey with the check was thought likely to induce good response. There were not enough site-verified PE projects to compare the paper method with either of the other methods with adequate precision. However, we delivered the paper survey with privacy envelopes for about half of those recipients to examine the effect of ensuring confidentiality.

The survey instrument was very brief – all questions fit on a single side of a sheet of paper. The instrument covered program satisfaction, indicators of free-ridership, future intentions to work with Energy Trust, and additional services desired from Energy Trust. Additional open-ended comments were solicited.

The goal of the sample plan was to achieve the industry-standard 10% precision, with 90% confidence, for each of the following groups, as defined by survey method and program participation:

- Paper survey – PE site-verified projects
- Phone survey – PE and EB unverified projects
- Phone survey – EB site-verified projects
- Web survey – PE and EB unverified projects
- Web survey – EB site-verified projects

COMPLETION RATES

We achieved high completion rates by telephone (77%) and paper (63% to 86%, depending on the calculation method). Rates for both methods were higher than that for the web survey (33%). To control for the fact that the method (paper, phone, or web) was somewhat confounded with the program, we examined completion rates separately by program; the results confirmed that both paper and phone methods were superior to web surveying. When just the paper method was considered, providing respondents with a privacy envelope did not increase the completion rate.

While a paper version of the survey may still be a viable method of surveying PE participants with site-verified projects, the convenience of using just one method that produces immediate data suggests that using the phone method for all participants may be preferred.

SURVEY RESULTS

The survey responses showed high levels of satisfaction with both the EB and PE program. Satisfaction was particularly high for the equipment covered, installation by vendors, assistance provided by the program representative, and the technical study (when there was one). Satisfaction with the incentive was somewhat higher in the PE than in the EB program. Participants of both programs were least satisfied with information provided about tax credits and with the program application process.

Both programs had a high level of influence on the participants' decision to do the upgrade project, with the incentive showing the greatest influence. For EB, vendors and contractors had the second-highest level of influence, reflecting the program theory of working through trade allies, but the influence of the program representative was nearly as strong; for PE, the technical study had slightly greater influence than the program representative, and vendors and contractors had the least influence. Almost all respondents said that they would contact their program representative again if they were considering installing other equipment.

Respondents' comments largely supported their satisfaction and influence ratings, including the generally lower levels of satisfaction with the application process. Some of the PE participants' comments suggested an orientation to energy planning that goes beyond a project-by-project approach.

In both programs, the most commonly reported outcome without program support would have been cancellation or postponement of the upgrade project, followed by some change retaining energy efficiency features; the least frequently reported outcome would have been continuation of the project with no changes. In both programs, the respondents who said that there was not sufficient budget for the project without program support outnumbered those who said there was sufficient budget, by a margin of two to one.

EFFECT OF SURVEY METHOD

The satisfaction and influence ratings were largely unrelated to survey method. There were two exceptions – among PE participants, paper survey recipients were more satisfied than others with their program representative and reported being more influenced than phone respondents (but not web respondents) by the incentive. The differences between the paper and phone results can be explained by the fact that paper survey recipients had more complex projects, and thus relied more heavily than phone survey responders on the program representative and the incentive. We believe the results also suggest a selection bias among the web survey respondents related to the lower completion rates in that group.

We found more survey method differences in responses to the change question. We believe that most of those differences were caused by a modification made to the phone survey method during the course of the pilot study, combined with selection bias in the web survey sample.

Providing a privacy envelope had no effect at all on survey responses.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The pilot study demonstrated that the fast feedback approach is successful with both phone and paper survey methods, but that phone surveys provide more immediate feedback and simplify data collection and management.

- ➡ ***Recommendation:*** Continue the Fast Feedback approach with the phone method and extend it to other Energy Trust programs.

Conclusion: The survey results indicated that both the EB and PE programs are running smoothly and having good success. The PE program may benefit from providing expanded gas-related services, and both programs – but particularly the PE program – may benefit from providing expanded energy management services, including O&M services.

- ➡ ***Recommendation:*** Continue both programs and expand gas services in the PE program and energy management services, including O&M services, in both PE and EB. Continue to promote the limited large project pilot.

Conclusion: The current approach to determining how projects would have changed without program support is good but could be improved. It assumes that continuing to use existing equipment implies no equipment upgrade, which may not be justified in all cases.

- ➡ ***Recommendation:*** Explore modifications to the approach to determine how projects would have changed without program support and test them over several months as the fast feedback approach is extended to other Energy Trust programs.

Conclusion: Failure to incorporate procedures for coordinating distribution of paper surveys with the data management activities made it difficult to track paper survey completions correctly.

- ➡ ***Recommendation:*** In any future similar survey, establish a methodology to ensure either that those who delivery paper surveys and those who manage the data work from the same list of recipients or that the group delivering the surveys provides accurate and timely information on survey recipients to the group managing the data.

MEMO

Date: April 8, 2010
To: Board of Directors
From: Sarah Castor, Evaluation Project Manager
Kim Crossman, Industry and Agriculture Sector Lead
Subject: Staff Response to Fast Feedback Pilot Results

The Fast Feedback survey pilot came out of a joint interest between Evaluation and Existing Buildings program staff in obtaining information about participant experience soon after projects are completed. Evaluation desired more accurate information about participant satisfaction and free ridership and program staff wanted to gather feedback on what could be improved so they could respond quickly with program design changes, if needed. After initial discussions, Production Efficiency staff also expressed interest and this program was brought in as another good candidate for the survey pilot.

Despite the simplicity of the survey concept, implementation proved challenging. Each program required distinct considerations in sampling, questions, and delivery. However, results prove that the effort was worth the trouble. Response rates were very high for phone and paper surveys and several participants reported appreciation for our efforts to gather feedback in such a timely manner. Satisfaction with the programs was high and we are confident that free ridership figures are more accurate than estimates gathered from participants a year or more after project completion, as is customary in program evaluations. Savings-weighted free ridership (not given in the report) was comparable to the last program evaluation for the Existing Buildings program and somewhat lower for Production Efficiency.

We plan to continue Fast Feedback and expand the survey to all of our major programs. Research Into Action has been contracted to conduct the roll out. Surveys will begin in May and continue through July for Q2 participants; a draft report for this expansion is expected in September 2010.

We agree with the recommendation to use phone surveys for all programs and participants. The use of one method will greatly simplify processes for this effort. We will also work with Research Into Action to improve the survey question about how the project would have changed without Energy Trust participation.