

Smart Grid Today

DONOVAN: Itron resonates with calls for big change

Customers, utilities agree they, not governments, hold key

The massive utility resourcefulness survey Itron rolled into an industry report recently (SGT, [Oct-1](#)), revealed agreement between consumers and utilities around the globe on the need for change in the utility world including the desire for more renewables and for smart cities, or as Itron VP of Global Marketing & Public Affairs Marina Donovan likes to think of them – smart communities. She explained that view and some of the details the firm discovered in its survey of thousands of utility customers and utility representatives in the latest episode of the *Smart Grid Today* [audio program](#).

The report included some details on deployments where Itron technology – including networking technology from Silver Spring Networks which Itron acquired at the start of this year – enables big changes for cities like Charlotte, NC; Copenhagen, Denmark; and Chicago, to name just a few of the hundreds where the firm's technology is deployed.

"Itron is at kind of a new juncture where we're really focused on enabling utilities and cities to safely, securely, and reliably deliver critical infrastructure services to communities and we do that in more than a hundred countries – and we've got a proven portfolio of smart networks software services, meters, and sensors, that ultimately help our customers better manage energy and water for the people they serve," Donovan said on the program.

"This is our fourth study and it talked to a thousand educated consumers and a thousand utility executives in 10 countries so it's a pretty voluminous report. I think it's got a lot of interesting insights... some that are pretty straightforward and some that are like, 'hmm, let's pause a minute and see where the industry is going.'"

Consumers reported being concerned about waste at their utility. "We had a question about what ways are your utility wasteful and a lot of people spoke to their concern about antiquated systems causing gas or water leaks the you're hearing more about in the press today," she added. "We heard a lot about too little use of renewable energy and not using innovative technology to be more efficient, and I thought that was really interesting.

QUOTABLE: Both consumers and utilities all agree that we all have a role we can play in resourcefulness and utilities might say consumers should be doing a better job... [and vice versa], but in any case, they agree it's something we can both be doing a better job on and neither one is looking for the government to lead. – *Itron VP of Global Marketing & Public Affairs in the latest episode of the Smart Grid Today audio program*

"This is just my point of view, but I think we should look at consumers as partners not as just consumers and I think if you change that mindset, that might change some of the ways that you market to your consumers and get them more engaged," she added.

Where to start? Donovan noted a universal truth with utility customers is the desire to spend less on energy. "I think that brings in an opportunity. One of the things that came up on the report was that the utility executives thought they were doing an OK job with connecting with consumers but consumer said, 'we need more education.'"

Itron sees itself as more than a technology firm these days and educating its utility customers – and in turn, the customers of those utilities – is a central focus for it. "The report says a lot of consumers want more digital touches in addition to getting that insert in your mailer – if you get one at home still."

Customers said they want to be able to go to the utility's website and social media, ranked in that order in the survey results, "and I think a lot of the Millennials expect that." Programs such as DR, "which put the consumer or your partner in control of their energy bill," has been a critical demand in projects Itron has played a key role in such as the Envision Charlotte program mentioned in the report.

The city was able to reduce consumption dramatically, saving money and also reducing the carbon footprint, Donovan said. Charlotte created the program in partnership with local utility Duke Energy called Smart Energy and Itron provided technology and funding, she added.

"They wanted to reduce the energy consumption with their commercial buildings, so they had 61 commercial buildings and in its first five years the program saved \$25 million in energy costs – equivalent to a year's worth of powering 10,000 homes," Donovan said. Carbon emissions fell the equivalent of taking some 11,000 cars off the road, she added, and since then the city attracted more partners and more than doubled the number of participating buildings, she added.

"So when you get that high level of engagement, that's a win-win – I mean your energy bills are down," Donovan said, noting the concept of a smart community is reflected in the partnership with local utilities, businesses, and with the citizens.

Streetlights are a focus

Another example of the smart community at work with Itron technology is Copenhagen, Denmark, where the firm networked smart street lights using LEDs. "We've got the ability to put up the network, control the street lights via the wireless network, and now all the street lights are LED which is a huge energy savings.

"We provided the technology which enabled them to achieve their goals and the beauty of it is that, once you've got the network up, you can put other applications on there which is what consumers are interested in. The survey again reiterated that and they listed all the things that citizens expect in their communities."

ComEd in Chicago did a street lighting project (SGT, [2016-April-20](#)) using Silver Spring Networks technology (SGT, [2015-Feb-12](#)). "In addition to huge carbon savings," these projects provide "better lighting and better safety for consumers because you have the ability to remotely turn them on or off," and to know immediately when lights need service.

Ready to make vision real

"We see a tremendous opportunity. We've had the good graces to be in this industry a long time with the acquisition of silver spring networks earlier this year." Donovan worked at Silver Spring and came to Itron with the acquisition, she noted.

"I think we've got the world's most proven network infrastructure out there for utilities and cities, but I think in terms of the key role we play in addition to being a technology supplier, I also look at our role as being an educator to both consumers, utilities, and regulators on the different advantages of using a connected infrastructure to make your community more smart. We've got some robust programs in social media on consumer education in addition to our ongoing efforts with educating our customers our prospects.

"I mean, we really care about our customers and the citizens and making this world a more resourceful place," Donovan said.

The full episode of the audio program is available for streaming from the *Smart Grid Today* [website](#) – and is on virtually all major podcast apps and services including the Amazon Echo and Google Home and Hub devices by saying, "play the *Smart Grid Today* podcast."

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