

Bill Pay System Called a Success

By Michael W. Kahn

It started with an idea: develop a service to manage the numerous utility bills that big companies are flooded with.

NRECA's Touchstone Energy® Cooperatives Chief Operating Officer Jim Bausell envisioned promoting such a service to co-ops as a way of adding value to their large accounts. He pitched the idea to National Information Solutions Cooperative.

The rest, as they say, is history.

Today, NISC receives electric, gas, water and other bills, and then schedules payments. But their Com-

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mercial and Industrial Billing Program goes a crucial extra step. facilities and who manage energy in these large companies," said Tracy Porter, NISC chief financial officer, who directed the project. "Having access to that data allows them to make good solid decisions on improving energy efficiencies."

"The original vision began when we realized that companies like Enron were trying to capture the business of multi-site national businesses," Bausell said. "Whoever controls the jugular vein of energy information can control access to future opportunities."

Businesses also get other benefits.

"Some customers look at it as a cost savings, because what we charge to process that invoice sometimes is significantly less than what it would cost them internally," Porter said. "Through our streamlined automation process, we've been able to show great improvements on reducing late fees and almost eliminating disconnect issues."

While NISC handles the bills and data, Touchstone Energy markets the program, using its access to energy managers at Fortune 500 firms. Dosch called it a great partnership.

"They were in a much better position to open some of those doors, to make the introductions that were critical to us, that admittedly would've

been pretty difficult for NISC to do on our own," he said.

One door Touchstone Energy opened was to Wal-Mart. "There was some skepticism, I think, on Wal-Mart's part as to whether or not our organization would be able to handle the number one retailer in the world," Dosch said. So NISC and Touchstone Energy funded a pilot project in which NISC processed bills for certain Wal-Mart stores without charge.

"What happened was the energy managers at Wal-Mart became our best sales people, because they could see how it was really giving them the data that they needed to do their jobs as they were supposed to," Dosch said.

Today, NISC pays the utility bills for all Wal-Mart stores in the U.S. They are among the 82,000 invoices, worth some \$130 million, that NISC handles each month.

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The co-op expects to be processing some 200,000 invoices a month by this time next year. NISC recently signed an agreement with T-Mobile, and will soon begin a pilot project along with EnergyUnited, Statesville, N.C., for the United States Postal Service.

"This is a perfect example of how good things can happen when members of the co-op family work together," Dosch said. □

Electric Co-op Today 8/24/07