

Judging Panel Insights on Best Practice Consumer Engagement: ENA ECA Consumer Engagement Awards 2021

Consumer Engagement Award Judging Panel

Chair: Lynne Gallagher, Energy Consumers Australia (ECA), Chief Executive Officer

Merryn York, Australian Energy Market Commission (AEMC), Commissioner

Catriona Lowe, Australian Energy Regulator (AER), Board Member

Robyn Robinson, Non-executive Director, Council on the Ageing (COTA)

Gavin Dufty, St Vincent De Paul Society, Manager Policy and Research

Mark Henley, Uniting Care Australia, Manager Advocacy and Energy Advocate

The independent Judging Panel thanks all network businesses that applied to this year's Consumer Engagement Awards, held by Energy Consumers Australia and Energy Networks Australia.

The Consumer Engagement Awards are an opportunity to commend Australian energy network businesses who are displaying outstanding leadership in consumer engagement. That is, incorporating consumer values into their business culture and practice and delivering the services consumers wants.

Consumer engagement by network businesses has progressed and evolved enormously in recent years, and the Judging Panel recognises there is a new standard of excellence and knowledge sharing that is important to commend. There is value in network businesses incorporating sector learnings, and the Panel has produced this document to inspire network businesses to continue implementing examples of best practice consumer engagement.

Cultural change starts at the top

Sustained and effective consumer engagement by network businesses requires a cultural change within executive and non-executive leadership, to enable a systemic restructuring of priorities and ensure a focus on delivering better outcomes for consumers. The most effective way of nurturing a cultural evolution within business, is through leadership commitments to demonstrate consumer engagement is embedded in business-as-usual.

Strong applications this year demonstrated such efforts, going beyond executive and non-executive support to active involvement that was consistent and continued throughout the engagement process. This included Board, CEO, and senior staff involvement at every step, which was a good indication to the Judging Panel that consumer engagement practices were being embedded through the network business from the top-down.

Strong leadership also increases the visibility of important consumer engagement learnings across the network businesses. The ability to share knowledge and learn from successful practices allows the industry to move forward together.

The benefits of listening and learning

Many strong applicants described an openness during the engagement process and willingness to be vulnerable. That is, network businesses made an authentic and proactive effort to seek out and listen to constructive consumer feedback. Network businesses are often engaging with contested issues in the engagement process and may encounter difficulties with achieving consumer acceptance or satisfaction. Open-mindedness is key, such that businesses start with an expectation to learn, as opposed to attempting to persuade or educate consumers on a predetermined preferred outcome.

The Judging Panel heard from a number of network businesses who displayed a genuine desire to learn and engage with consumers. They listened to and actively sought out the diversity of their consumer cohort needs, not just ones that could be easily addressed. Further, they acknowledged the while there is discomfort in not having a predetermined outcome and it may be daunting to let consumer values drive the process, this allowed successful outcomes for both consumers and the network businesses themselves.

The Judging Panel notes that solely educating consumers to ensure acceptance is not consumer engagement. A willingness to listen, learn, and change in the face of feedback can be a challenging task, but one that is necessary to improve consumer engagement practices and ultimately deliver better consumer outcomes.





Consumers influencing project evolution

Equally important to a network business' willingness to engage, is a recognition that the process itself must be iterative and provide flexibility as the engagement progresses. Consumer engagement as an iterative process is crucial. That is, network businesses listening to consumer feedback and allowing consumer opinions, values, and knowledge to set, alter, or change the network course of action. Strong applicants were able to identify how their project evolved through the consumer engagement process, and many committed to co-designing with consumers as partners without a predetermined outcome. The merit of this iterative process enabled learnings to be implemented along the way, ensuring better outcomes for consumers were achieved. The Judging Panel encourages this consumer engagement model where appropriate.

Additionally, best practice consumer engagement requires network businesses to reflect on the challenges and opportunities that occurred throughout the process. The Judging Panel notes that documenting the journey provides context to outcomes and learnings that can be replicated by the network itself, and across the whole sector. This also amplifies the successful outcomes of the engagement process and network business achievements, through contextualising the journey it took to get there. It is important for network businesses to clearly explicate how their engagement featured in their projects, and how the engagement itself informed the design and execution. For example, investigating consumer sentiment and canvassing a range of consumer perspectives can help create common ground between network businesses and consumers, such that the business priorities and consumer expectations are balanced. Best practice consumer engagement may use this new approach to reshape network business thinking on how to approach contested issues.

Ensuring consumer engagement leads to consumer outcomes

The strongest applicants were able to explain how their engagement process led to better outcomes for consumers. This is crucial, as the primary purpose of consumer engagement is to bring about favourable outcomes for consumers. The Judging Panel considers that best practice consumer engagement is able to present evidence on how incorporating measurable benefits for consumers led to better consumer outcomes. Often there is a degree of difficulty in engaging with contentious issues, and it is important to celebrate the network businesses' achievements where possible.

The Judging Panel also notes that a network business actioning something in consumers' interests is not the same as consumer engagement. That is, best practice consumer engagement should involve consumer voices as partners in the evolving process. For example, strong applicants listened to consumers, and engaged with any challenges to deliver positive consumer outcomes. Further, network businesses should be able to provide evidence of measurable outcomes for consumers. This may not be monetary but could be the demonstration of tangible and significant changes in sentiment or impact seen when comparing pre- and post-engagement.

Again, transparency in the journey network businesses underwent in their consumer engagement programs is crucial, for learnings to be implemented across their business and the adoption of best practice in the sector more broadly.



“Engagement, or public participation, is a process for making better decisions that incorporates the interests and concerns of all affected stakeholders and meets the needs of the decision-making body.”

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)

