

# Sightline Daily

NORTHWEST NEWS THAT MATTERS

## Riding the Bus... 'Cause Julie's Cool

Posted by Lisa Stiffler  
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Info on what your peers are doing can encourage good behavior.



If you want to get folks to cut their energy use, you don't necessarily have to raise rates or hand out fluorescent light bulbs. Just let them know how much juice the Joneses are using. An article in the [Atlantic Monthly](#) reports that giving utility customers information on how much power they used compared to their neighbors drives down consumption.

The strategy was devised by Robert Cialdini, a social psychologist from Arizona State University and expert in tweaking human behavior through what he calls "peer information" (as opposed to peer pressure).

A company called [Positive Energy](#), at which Cialdini is the chief scientist, has created software that measures energy usage by neighborhood. Here's how it's used:

Results are sent to consumers on behalf of their local utility, praising you with a row of smiley faces (you've used 58 percent less electricity than your neighbors this month!) or damning you with none (you used 39 percent more electricity than your neighbors in the past 12 months, and it cost you \$741 extra).

In Positive Energy's reports, a once-intangible bit of social information—how much energy you use relative to your neighbors—is made tangible. Now you can find out not just what people in the same city are doing, but what people in your neighborhood, living in the same-size houses, are doing...

The approach was tested in Sacramento. How'd it work?

... Positive Energy began its pilot program with the Sacramento Municipal Utility District in 2008, people who received personalized "compared with your neighbors" data on their statements reduced their energy use by more than 2 percent over the course of a year. In energyspeak, a 2 percent reduction is huge; with the pilot sample of 35,000 homes, it's the equivalent of taking 700 homes off the grid.

The research made me think of my own experience with riding the bus. It's something I never really did growing up or when at college. I don't love driving, but it's what I've always done. Then a colleague named Julie at the *Seattle P-I* mentioned that she took the bus. I liked Julie. She lived not too far from my house, was a smart, cool girl, and was a reporter like me.

It made me rethink my no-to-buses policy, and after not too long I started taking the bus -- not every day, but when it fit with my reporting duties. I found that I liked the time to read, and that the bus was consistently on schedule. I made reference to bus riding to other colleagues when I got the chance, trying to spread the faith, Cialdini-style. I'm not sure if I got many converts, but I'm still working on it.

And some Washington residents will be getting a chance to get Positive Energy feedback; the *Atlantic* article said that their services are coming to the state. I've contacted the company for more information and will update this post when I get a response.

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