

You asked.

We're answering.

This is the first in a series of responses to concerns expressed by members during a recent anonymous survey.

Member comment: "The co-op isn't flexible. It's just another big business and we're the little guys."

Response from Mark Pendergast, President and CEO: My first reaction is I'm happy the member didn't comment about being treated rudely or in an unprofessional way in what wasn't a favorable situation for them.

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It sounds as if whatever the issue was we ultimately didn't do what the member wanted. As long as a member is respectful, non-threatening and leaves out the foul language, we're all pretty patient listeners at the co-op. We will spend a lot of time hearing someone out – to see what can be done, however, at times the answers aren't always what the member wants to hear.

Since I don't know the exact situation where we weren't flexible in the member's eyes I'm going to guess it had something to do with their payment, deposit or something related.

How we treat each member is very important to us. We will not and do not discriminate in any way within our membership. Whether you pay a bill of \$5,000 a month or \$50, it doesn't impact how we interact with you and the level of service you receive. Every member of this co-op must be treated equally and within the guidelines of our operating procedures and board approved policies. Since our directors are also members of the cooperative and represent all the members' interests, their policies are developed for the good of the entire cooperative and not one class or type of member.

Unfortunately more than 15 percent of our members pay their bill late each month. Every member is allowed one late payment per year without a penalty. If you want us to waive your penalty for a second late payment, we won't do this. As employees we can't be in a position of giving special treatment for one member over another. If we waived your late payment penalty why should we collect it from your neighbor who is also a member of the cooperative? Visa may waive your finance charge for one month, because they have self interests to keep you as a customer and they know there's more profit for them in the long run to keep you as a customer. Your cooperative is a not for profit business. Our self interest is to deliver the best service at the lowest cost possible for every member's benefit.

One of the drawbacks to company of our size, with a total of only 15 administrative and technical employees, is we need to operate within certain standard procedures and guidelines in order to be efficient and consistent in the delivery of our services. **We process 120,000 bills per year and this many payments. We have 700 new members each year who move into existing homes and apartments and the same**

number who leave our service. If you've been consistently paying your bill each month for years just in time to avoid a late payment charge or even later to avoid a disconnection and this month we don't receive your usual payment, an automated process will begin. It may even result in your service being disconnected. You will get at least one recorded reminder phone call but only if you've provided a contact number for us. Before a disconnection a mailed notice is sent. As much as we'd like to talk with you to see if your payment was lost in the mail or to learn you are out of town and can pay over the phone with a credit card, we regrettably don't have the staff to devote to this level of individual service.

Yes, there are times we want to look like the big guys. It's awfully hard to do with a total staff of only 25. But our after-hours contact center needs to sound and act like a professional big business when you call to report your outage or to check on your balance due. We need to have the technology to process your call and give you the information you want immediately and we do. Our website needs to look and act like a big utility as well and it does. Pay your bill on-line, get forms and information and even view your electric usage by day on our site.

Most of the time we don't want to be or act like the big guys. When you call our office a real person answers the phone. If we need to do scheduled maintenance on a line and your power will be out we will call you and let you know about the outage. If we are inspecting equipment on your property we will send you a notice about who is doing the work and when they will be in your area. If your energy use spiked one month and you call and we can't help you figure out where the power was used, we'll send someone to your home to investigate at no-charge. You never need an appointment to get access to an employee, including me.

As a member of this cooperative you are a big guy. At the co-op we're the little guys and we like it this way. But please don't ask us to give you better treatment than the other 10,000 members we work for. This isn't flexibility, it's favoritism and it's not the cooperative way of doing business.