

The Guilty Environmentalist

Resurrecting Reddy Kilowatt

Born of lightning and inspiration, one of America's most recognized advertising icons is about to exit retirement for a second shot at fame. For seven decades, Reddy Kilowatt® served as the official mascot of the electric utility industry, licensed for use by as many as 200 electric utilities in the US and abroad.

Reddy is part of an elite class of corporate spokesfigures who have become enduring symbols of culture and commerce.

Created in 1925 by Alabama Power Company executive Ashton Collins, Sr., the familiar "bolt and bulb" figure symbolized the power industry during a time of tremendous growth and goodwill. Electricity was perceived as a universal good and Reddy pitched the modern miracles of electric lighting, motors and refrigeration. Over the years, Reddy came to be closely associated with energy use--particularly during the era of atomic energy. He never quite managed to click with the conservation crowd and faded from the scene in recent times.

Now, Reddy is "under new management" and on the verge of finding a second career in the age of e-commerce. His new owners at Northern States Power Company (NSP, soon to become Xcel) have devised for him a revised sense of purpose and they've begun negotiations with other utilities to spread Reddy's familiar face across the Internet.

The official history of Reddy Kilowatt paints him in bright and benign colors. Collins, who was general commercial manager for Alabama Power, was trying to develop a way to humanize the power industry. His idea was based on a personal belief that electricity is a "servant of mankind" and, Collins once said, "I got to wondering what an Electric Servant would look like."

Inspiration came during a thunderstorm. Tracing two lightning bolts converging into a likeness of a man, Collins drew a jagged stick figure, added rubberized hands and feet and gave him a round smiling face with a light-bulb nose and socket ears.

Part of Collins' plan was to license the symbol to other utilities as a way of unifying the disparate and geographically segregated industry. Philadelphia Electric Company became the first franchisee.

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The power of advertising icons to convey a positive image and goodwill for a product or company cannot be minimized. Reddy is a member of an elite class of corporate spokesfigures who have transcended their advertising role to become enduring symbols of culture and commerce.

One of the first and most durable of these icons is the Quaker Oats Man first introduced in 1879. Among Reddy's more endearing classmates from the 20th Century are: the Campbell Soup Kids, the Morton Salt Girl, Mr. Peanut, Betty Crocker, Chiquita the Banana, Ronald McDonald and the Energizer Bunny.

The man most responsible for the resurrection of Reddy Kilowatt is Tom Micheletti, vice president of public and government affairs for NSP and now president and CEO of Reddy Kilowatt Corporation.

Like Reddy's creator, Micheletti puzzled over a way to give consumers a positive image of electricity and the companies that deliver it. Today's challenges differ from those of the 1920s. Restructuring of the industry is redefining the nature of utilities in ways that neither consumers nor executives fully understand.

Micheletti explained, "As public-spirited as utilities have always been, we've never had to contemplate how to retain our retail customer base." Restructuring of the industry and the introduction of direct competition by non-utility companies are changing that. Many companies were trying to forge a new kind of brand consciousness among consumers, but they face enormous hurdles and prohibitive costs.

Through a long-time friendship with Ash Collins, son of Reddy's creator, Micheletti realized that the solution to his problem already existed. Collins still owned the rights to the figure and used it as a foundation for his New Mexico-based Reddy Corporation consulting group.

"So, I went to Albuquerque to talk with him," Micheletti said. "I wasn't going to come back until I owned the rights to Reddy Kilowatt."

The deal was done a little over a year ago. Since then, NSP has been strategizing ways to reintroduce its new employee to the modern world. "Our idea is to merge Reddy with new technology--the Internet."

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Reddy still carries a strong recognition factor with the general public. “Even for those who are too young to remember him, there is an immediate, visceral reaction to Reddy that is very positive,” he said. The company believes that with a renewed promotional campaign, it can return Reddy to prominence among consumers. “We’re going to rebrand Reddy Kilowatt again, to form a consortium of utilities across the US and create a new network for Reddy.”

The plan is to build a Web site presence based around Reddy, who will be the guide to consumer information about energy efficiency products and services, including an on-line home energy audit. In the works are “Consumer Reports”-like ratings for appliances and an electronic commerce component in which customers can buy and finance their purchases.

“Our goal is to become the energy portal for residential customers,” Micheletti said. Although many other utilities are also trying to turn their Home Pages to similar functions, Micheletti sees a distinct advantage for NSP and its eventual partners. “We’ve got Reddy. Nobody can match that.”

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