

Let the Sun Shine In: Lessons from Evaluating Two Solar Programs

*Linda Dethman, The Cadmus Group, Inc., Portland, OR
Brian Sipe, Energy Trust of Oregon, Portland, OR*

Introduction and Background

The potential of solar energy is largely untapped in the U.S. Over the years, Energy Trust of Oregon (ETO) has launched a variety of educational and incentive initiatives aimed at raising visibility and adoption of solar power. However, while research shows consumer interest keeps rising, adoption has not risen at the same rate, due to a variety of emotional and practical barriers, including inertia, logistics, confusion about what solar can and cannot do, cost of systems, fear of lifestyle changes, and perceived lack of social acceptability.

In 2009 and 2010, ETO launched two innovative programs with different strategies to try to overcome barriers to solar adoption. Both Solarize Southeast Portland (Solarize SE) and Solar Energy Reviews (SER) were designed to move people more quickly, with less stress and uncertainty, toward installing solar. This poster will compare and contrast the results of evaluative research that examined how well these strategies have worked. It is based upon interviews with program staff; surveys with participants in each program and drop-outs from Solarize SE; and program tracking system data.

Key Findings and Outcomes

- Overall, the results show that Program Solarize SE – a neighborhood-based approach – produced significantly stronger follow-through rates to installing solar (37%) than the targeted solar review approach of SER (4%).
- Solarize SE and SER participants were motivated by different factors, with participants in Solarize SE being more focused on pragmatic reasons to install solar, such as the ‘good deal’ and program support, than SER participants, who were more motivated by being green and finding out if their homes qualified for solar.
- Key elements of the strong success of Solarize SE, compared to SER, were that it:
 - Selected a single contractor through a competitive bidding process;
 - Offered a low bulk price;
 - Made the path to installing solar easier;
 - Steered participants to sponsor incentives and state and federal tax credits;
 - Educated consumers about solar energy;
 - Was community based and driven
 - Was sponsored by known and credible organizations
 - Made solar visible and desirable to the neighborhood and beyond.
- SER, while highly successful in satisfying customers and in its ability to give a personalized face to the program sponsor, did not push consumers more quickly, or much at all, toward solar.
- Success of Solarize SE has lead to a number of follow-on programs in other locations. The lack of solar installation uptake through SER resulted in a recommendation to eliminate the service from the sponsor’s portfolio of programs.