

# CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

## **The Introduction of Something New**

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Chicago area companies presented more than 225 innovations in products and services in the fifth annual Chicago Innovation Awards program.

“The drive for innovation is burning brightly in the Chicago area,” said Tom Kuczarski, name partner in new-product consultancy Kuczarski & Associates and co-founder of the award along with the Chicago Sun-Times. “We’ve seen hundreds of innovative ideas over the past five years of the Innovation Award program, but this year’s crop truly was stunning.”

The 10 Innovation Award honorees are profiled in this special section of the Chicago Sun-Times, and will receive their awards next Monday evening in a special ceremony on the main stage of the Goodman Theatre.

Dan Miller, business editor of the Sun-Times, said, “Since the award’s debut in 2003, we’ve discovered that the key ingredient in innovation is the Chicago area itself. It provides the combustible material for innovators who make the flame and for the spark-makers in the companies who nurture it.”

Kuczarski consultants, Sun-Times business staffers and former honoree Ray Geneille Jr. of QuesTek Innovations sifted through the record 227 nominations, and selected 10 for the honor.

The panel sought successfully developed and marketed ideas that met the following criteria:

- Created a new category of business activity.
- Provoked a “me-too” response from competitors.
- Solved unmet customer and consumer needs.
- Generated revenue — not necessarily profits.

The Chicago Innovation Awards received strong support from all sectors of the Chicago business community, and especially these sponsors:

The Chicago Board of Trade, InterOcean Financial Group, Microsoft Corp., Wm. Wrigley Jr. Co., the Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, the Goodman Theatre,

Maggiano's Little Italy, Market Strategy Group, Slack Barshinger, and WBBM Newsradio 780.

For more information about the Chicago Innovation Awards program and the 2007 program, go to [chicagoinnovationawards.com](http://chicagoinnovationawards.com)

## **Group Lights the Way to Cheaper Energy Bills**

BY [MARY WISNIEWSKI](#) Business Reporter

People in the power industry thought the Community Energy Cooperative was nuts when it introduced real-time electricity pricing to residential customers.

"The conventional thinking was that residential customers weren't interested in paying attention to their energy use," said Kathryn Tholin, CEO of the Center for Neighborhood Technology. The cooperative is an affiliate of CNT. "It's too complicated. It's risky. People don't want to deal with fluctuating prices."

A three-year pilot program proved the skeptics wrong. Under the Energy-Smart Pricing Plan, customers save money, reduce their power use and cut stress on the system.

Now a new law requires utilities to offer hourly, market-based electricity prices to residential customers statewide in 2007. The Energy-Smart Pricing Plan inspired interest and imitators around the country, and has earned a Chicago Innovation Award for 2006.

"What we've proved is that residential customers will change the way they use energy," Tholin said. "Customers love the program."

Under the pilot program, about 1,100 Commonwealth Edison customers in the Chicago area buy their electricity on an hourly basis on the market, rather than using a regulated flat rate set by the utility. The customers learn when electric rates are cheaper -- such as the early morning or late evening -- and when they'll be high, such as on a hot summer day.

Customers have saved an average of 10 percent on their bills, and cut their power use by 3 percent to 4 percent through simple measures like turning on the drier at night or leaving off the air conditioner during the day.

"I do a lot of things later in the day than I used to," said Cheryl Kinkead, 57, of Elgin, one of the real-time customers. "I do things smarter. In the summer, I wait until evening to make cookies, so I don't heat up the house."

Besides saving money, reducing use during peak periods takes the strain off the electric grid, which can reduce the risk of a blackout and lower prices for everybody.

Customers in the program use a special meter, worth about \$125 and paid for by ComEd and the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, to measure hourly use. Customers are alerted to price spikes through e-mails or phone calls. Customers can also check prices for the day ahead on a Web site.

Tholin compares the real-time program to buying fruit at the store based on what's in season. "You can make a decision -- do I want to use less when the price is high?"

She said an increase in the use of real-time pricing will help drive the market for real-time technology -- like driers that won't run when the cost of power is above a certain price.

The Illinois Commerce Commission is reviewing testimony on how to best manage a real-time program for the state, including details like who will pay for the special meters.

Tholin believes that 3 percent, or about 100,000 ComEd customers, will sign up for real-time pricing during the next three years. The program might seem more attractive now that ComEd's fixed rate is expected to rise 22 percent in 2007.

"If people see their rates going up and they want an opportunity to save, this is a viable option," Tholin said.

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