Sasol ignites the “want” to switch to energy efficiency

In what is touted one of the most successful and inspiring energy efficiency campaigns to grow awareness and spur adoption of solar water heating technologies by a private company, Sasol has helped 135 of its employees convert to solar water heating in the past year through its Solar Sense project. The programme achieved a conversion rate of 3% of the Sasol target market, which is impressive given the relatively low initial awareness of solar technologies, historical barriers to adoption such as cost, and the timeframe of the project.

Employees convert with Sasol Solar Sense

The year-long Solar Sense project, part of Sasol's focused, ongoing campaign to nurture employees' understanding of the need to save electricity and inculcate a culture of energy efficiency, has attracted interest from other large companies to consider implementing similar campaigns. Sasol is enthusiastic to share their key success factors and learnings to assist other companies embarking on similar journeys.

Bringing solar closer to Sasol employees

Sasol, the largest private producer of power in South Africa, actively promotes energy efficiency, the responsible use of resources, and the adoption of clean energy alternatives amongst its 27,000 employees. This 'corporate attitude' is born from the understanding that South Africa cannot reach its energy saving targets, become a low carbon emission country, or sustain the energy demands of its growing economy without the buy-in and help of its citizens.

Chemcity, the enterprise development division of Sasol, launched the Solar Sense campaign in October 2011. Spearheaded and project managed by specialist business analyst Reinah Bosch, the campaign formed part of the company’s holistic effort to encourage employees to embrace energy
efficiency, and support them in adopting clean solar energy for water heating in their homes. The Solar Sense programme is aligned with Eskom’s campaign to reduce energy consumption in South Africa’s residential sector by at least 10%.

Solar Sense aimed to make it easier and feasible for Sasol employees to install solar water heating systems or heat pumps in their homes. Through the nationwide campaign, Sasol facilitated its employees’ access to quality systems and installers, credible technical information and support, and financing through a third party financier.

The project was administered by Innovation Group, a key player in the alternative energy sector that specialises in the roll-out and installation administration of energy-saving solutions. The company provided invaluable expertise and complete back-office support for the large project.

“Sasol is committed to making a positive contribution towards lowering carbon emissions in support of the environment as well as the 49 Million initiative. 49 Million is spurring an urgent need for all South Africans to embrace energy savings as a proud national culture to ensure a sustainable future - economically, socially and environmentally.

“We believe installing solar water heating systems or heat pumps in place of conventional electrical element geysers can make a positive impact in terms reducing the demand for electricity and pollution in South Africa.

“Our Solar Sense initiative aimed to increase our employees’ awareness of these energy saving technologies and facilitate the switch from conventional geysers,”

Maurice Radebe, Sasol Group Executive

Factors critical to the Solar Sense success

Emphasis on motivating employees

Much of the success of the project is attributable to the considerable investment and emphasis on education of and awareness amongst employees.

The team, with representatives from Innovation Group, embarked on “The Sunshine Tour”, a nationwide road show. These ‘carnival’-themed events, complete with popcorn and candy floss, were engaging and insightful experiences that captivated Sasol employees. At the events, employees were told about the project, learned about the various energy efficiency technologies available, and given tips on living resource-responsible lifestyles.

Competitions were held in which employees could win solar water heating systems and water storage tanks. In addition, energy saving lights and energy and water saving showerheads were exchanged. Thousands of employees attended the events and within a month, 4,000 leads were generated.

Ongoing communication and easy access to user-friendly information

To maintain momentum, regular newsletters relating to Solar Sense were distributed to
employees and the intranet site was frequently updated; employees who had purchased solar water heating systems were used as project ambassadors.

Designed to be user friendly, a dedicated ‘green’ portal is available on the company's intranet where employees can find information about energy efficient technologies, how to save electricity through behavioural change and solar water heating systems - the various models, tips on installation, and the manufacturers of these systems. Amongst others, the site also includes important facts about new building regulations and how the installation of solar water heating systems could affect insurance policies. An innovative feature is a ‘green house’ which allows employees to take a virtual tour of an energy efficient home; running your mouse over rooms and features in each room brings up a host of interesting and helpful information on improving resource and energy efficiency.

“Intensive and on-going communication and awareness are the key factors that are often missing in similar campaigns by other organisations which haven’t achieved the same level of success.

“We knew that igniting excitement about energy efficiency and motivating employees to make changes to their lifestyles would be critical to the campaign’s success. Energy efficiency isn’t always ‘top of mind’ and awareness of solar technologies amongst average South Africans is relatively poor. We needed to increase the level of understanding and maintain the momentum throughout the programme.”

Vijay Heeralall, Project Manager at Sasol: ChemCity

Simplified purchasing process

From the intranet, employees keen to make the ‘switch to solar and save’ could initiate the process. With a click of a mouse, they could generate an initial quote after which they would be contacted by one of the two pre-selected and approved suppliers who would accurately assess their hot water requirements, generate a formal quote, and facilitate the installation.

A call centre was also established, allowing employees to investigate purchasing a solar water heating system and initiate the process telephonically; the process from quotation-and-installation-to-financing was streamlined and managed by capable partners.

The call centre was a port of call for employees for installation advice, logging incidents and complaints, and help with using their systems. Common complaints received were that installers hadn’t arrived on time. A high level of management was necessary to ensure that incidents like these were flagged and dealt with efficiently. A customer satisfaction survey was developed and sent to programme participants just after the quotation phase.

Also, Eskom helped make the energy efficiency rebate process simpler by providing the rebate upfront so that the price of solar water heating
systems was discounted at point of purchase.

**Strong administrative partner**

Strong, skilled and experienced partnerships helped to ensure the success of the project. The administrator, Innovation Group, has extensive experience in implementing large-scale energy efficiency projects. This experience, coupled with established infrastructure, a robust MIS system, and flexibility to adapt quickly to changes in the scope of the project, ensured that the programme flowed unhindered.

Innovation Group has a dedicated panel of suppliers that are selected based on stringent quality-control requirements and, through these strategic relationships, the cost benefit of installing a solar water heating system can be passed on to employees. Innovation Group also guided Sasol employees through the purchase and installation process.

“It is important for administrators of programmes like Solar Sense to have the relevant experience, necessary capacity, as well as flexibility. Companies must also be prepared to contribute to the training and development of suppliers to ensure their stability and that of the programme. During the project there was significant merging of our business with our suppliers’ businesses to ensure that processes were streamlined.”

*Llewellan Vance, Business Development Manager, Alternate Energy: Insurance, Innovation Group*

**Quality systems and reliable suppliers**

All systems that were available through the Solar Sense programme had a five year guarantee, were SABS approved, and had minimum 30% local content. The suppliers were carefully evaluated and selected based on their experience, quality and reliability of systems, and ability to support nationwide installations. Service agreements were enforced to ensure that timelines for responding to requests, complaints and incidents were adhered to.

“The solar water heater market has been marred with the import of cheap, unreliable systems which has, to an extent, affected the uptake of the technology. By stipulating that systems must be SABS approved and have 30% local content, this programme provided an opportunity for Sasol to stimulate and help grow the local solar water heating system market.”

*Reinah Bosch, Specialist Business Analyst and Programme Manager, Sasol Solar Sense*

**A competitive offering**

Innovation Group and Sasol successfully negotiated fixed pricing per quarter to ensure that the Solar Sense value proposition and offering remained competitive.
Employees purchasing solar water heating systems or heat pumps through the project received rebates via Eskom’s energy efficiency rebate programmes for the homeowner; employees had the choice of buying their systems cash or opting to finance the system at preferential rates.

**A trusted financier**

IEMAS was chosen as the financier through a strict tender process, and provided attractive financing options to make it financially feasible for Sasol employees to purchase a solar water heating system or water heating pump.

**Regular work groups with partners**

Close interaction between all partners was essential to ensure the smooth running of the project. Weekly workshops were held to thrash out concerns, deal with problems and incidents, and plan ahead. This ensured agility to respond to changes to the scope of the project.

**Buy-in from top management**

Chemcity was mandated by Sasol to introduce and run the project, which meant the programme had an allocated budget and buy-in and support from the company’s top management.

**Summary of key learnings**

- Pick ... strong partners that can handle and manage incidents, and fulfil warranty obligations.
- Promote ... quality systems with local content.
- Use ... reputable suppliers.
- Don’t ... underestimate the maturity of the market; pragmatists still see solar water heating systems as a ‘grudge’ purchase.
- Time ... the launch of the project carefully; summer offers an excellent opportunity.
- Don’t ... over-simplify the target market; data analytics are crucial to defining a realistic target market.
- Have ... an efficient system in place to document and manage mass leads.
- Implement ... upfront lead qualification to filter leads that are genuine and true for first response.
- Market and promote ... the campaign continuously.
- Supply ... user friendly information.
Be prepared … for shifts in the scope of the project.

**Eskom’s rebates are available to all South African homeowners**

Eskom’s energy efficiency rebate programmes enable homeowners to buy solar water heating systems and heat pumps at a discount. Call the Customer Contact Centre at 08600-ESKOM (37566) or go to [www.eskom.co.za/idm](http://www.eskom.co.za/idm) for detailed information.

**Embarking on energy efficiency campaigns**

Eskom is on standby to assist companies who wish to embark on internal energy efficiency campaigns - call the Customer Contact Centre at 08600-37566 and ask to speak to an Eskom Energy Advisor.

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