Elderly couple seemed to vanish, Headlee explains

An elderly couple in Minnesota had kept in such close touch with their utility for years that when their calls suddenly stopped coming in 2008, the customer service representatives worried about their health and wellbeing, Josh Headlee told us recently. He is president of Accelerated Innovations, the St Paul, Minn-based firm that provides software called MyMeter.

The couple had called the Wright-Hennepin Cooperative Electric Assn of Rockford, Minn, nearly 1,200 times within three months to check on their power use and billing, he added. They were found alive and well – and in front of their computer, captivated by the MyMeter website that the utility had recently made available for testing to its smart meter customers, Headlee said.

The couple had opted into the program and was able to monitor their usage on an hourly basis, to compare it to that of their neighbors and customers with similar demographics, to contrast it against their own historic usage – and to see how the temperature outside affected their use.

They were happy and so were a number of the utility's other customers who took part in the test, he added. Wright-Hennepin's benchmark score in the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ASCI) rose 8% after the MyMeter program began – to an index score of 91 in 2010 from 84 in 2008.

Today, 17% of Wright-Hennepin's 38,000 residential customers have opted into MyMeter as a tool for energy usage insights, Headlee said. In turn, there has been a 10% reduction in call volume at the customer service center, he added.

The platform also is helping to relieve the utility of its load.

Wright-Hennepin has logged an average reduction in household electric use of 3% overall in its service territory, and the MyMeter program has been the driving force behind the utility's new off-peak metering rates and "Beat the peak" DR program.

And MyMeter, a proprietary software program developed by Accelerated Innovations, has followed up its initial pilot programs in its home state with six ongoing relationships with the regional utilities, renewed annually, Headlee said.

A recent evaluation of four of the programs – conducted at the behest of the Minnesota Dept of Commerce by Illume Advisors of Madison, Wisc, found that average annual savings for residential customers ranged from 1.8-2.8%. These savings, Illume stated in its report, "are roughly 20% higher than claims by other behavioral energy efficiency programs.

"Savings persisted at a steady level during the first two years of participation, and were higher for participants with higher baseline usage," the study found. Furthermore, the evaluation found that participants engaging with the energy use feedback portal over more than a six-month period achieved nearly double the savings (approaching 4%).

"We have huge coverage in Minnesota," Headlee told us. "Our only frustration is that we cannot get in the door at the state's largest utility, Xcel Energy [which serve more than 3 million electric customers under the auspices of its Northern States Power-Minnesota subsidiary]. But we're working on it."

In addition to Minnesota, MyMeter programs have been commissioned in 14 other states nationwide, and the firm wants to expand internationally – with a new pilot just beginning in India. Among the functionalities the system offers are: load management and efficiency help; outage management notifications; energy usage visualizations; support of TOU and peak rate structures; customer communications, and improved billing options, including pre-payment.

The firm is open to not only annually licensing its software but also to "perpetual licensing, so that, even if a utility isn't interested in our cloud solution, they can host it on their premises," Headlee said.

Accelerated Innovations is also looking at "district energy," he told us.

In this new market, "distributed heat is generated in a centralized location for residential and commercial heating requirements" like space and water heating," Headlee said.