

# Georgia Power is Leading by Their Customers' Example

When you think about where innovation is happening in demand-side management, California or Massachusetts probably spring to mind. Rarely are our utility friends in the South recognized. So, it may surprise you to learn that some of the deepest and most forward-thinking customer research in the industry is happening in the heart of the Southeast—at Georgia Power.

*"ILLUME was the perfect team to bring in for this work.*

*We knew through our past work with ILLUME that they would bring state of the art research along with exceptional management practices.*

*They have given us truly actionable findings to take our programs into the future."*

*-Jeff Smith,  
Georgia Power Energy Efficiency Strategy  
and Implementation Manager*

Georgia Power is making a significant commitment to learning from their customers and exploring how they engage with energy in their daily lives. As Georgia Power's long-term research team, we have the privilege of being in close conversation with residential and commercial customers to examine and elevate their needs.

## Our Model

### Beginning with the End in Mind; Long-term Planning Drives Success

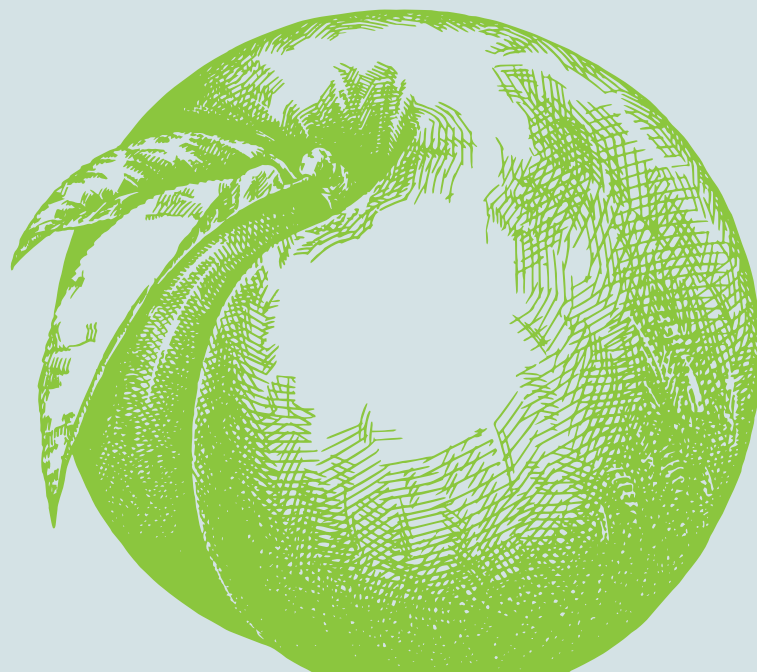
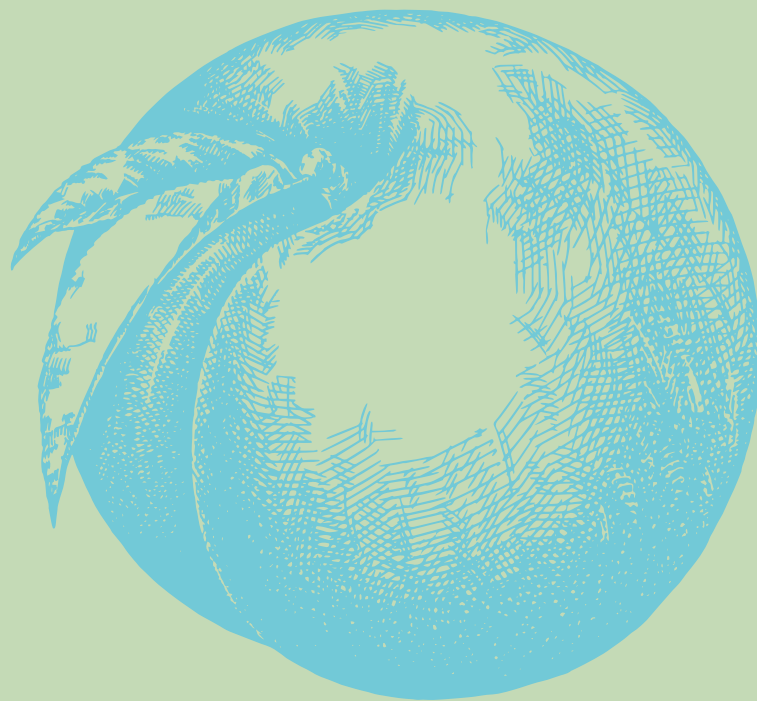
ILLUME's work began with a full-day workshop where we helped the Georgia Power energy efficiency team, along with their implementer ICF, create a vision for their customer relationship of the future.

Building from that first step, we developed a three-year research strategy to fill gaps in customer knowledge. Taking a long-term approach has allowed our team to create generative insight.

### Exploratory, Story-based Research Unearths the Unknowns

Our research approach follows best practices in design by starting with discovery-oriented storytelling and evolving into detailed programmatic investigation. Employing this method, we are helping Georgia Power identify specific and compelling ways to communicate and develop richer relationships with customers.

To build a foundation of understanding, we used in-home and in-business ethnographic research to explore how social and local culture impacts residents' perceptions of energy, efficiency, light, home, and comfort. We explored how specific language does or does not connect to the things that matter in customers' lives.



We used this insight to help the implementation team understand the barriers that hold customers back from participating in Georgia Power's programs and how better messaging can help them tie into customers' core values.

## Residential Customers Speak

Our team toured the state of Georgia, conducting in-depth interviews with Georgians in their homes – tasting every Southern culinary delight we could find – and focusing on their perceptions of community, safety, and family in the context of energy, and decision-making channels in the context of home and household. When talking to Georgians about lighting, we found that most people described the home atmosphere – they thought about it in aesthetic terms – not only the financial cost of a bulb or the electricity bill. We also found that family dynamics impacted lighting choices; as with everything in the home, choices about energy and energy efficiency were made in the context of the whole household, with harmony as a key driver. Program messaging needs to match the language customers use – a desire for radiant and bright spaces – and explain how the program can support them in creating their home the way they like and as it fits their family.



*"I just let Grandma go with whatever. I'm cold natured, so I will always have a jacket on or something like that. I'll go outside to get some heat, because she'll be like, 'You cold?' 'Mmm-mmm. No. I'm good,' because you gotta let her do what she wants to do."*

– Kayla, 35, Columbus

## A Commitment to Inclusivity

A common thread throughout all the research we've done with Georgia Power is their dedication to reaching and serving their diverse and multicultural customer base. Through a focused study, we helped Georgia Power better understand how – and in what language – to engage the Korean and Vietnamese communities in Atlanta metro that have been expanding their roots for the better part of two decades.

This research found that, while younger generations tended to be bilingual, almost 30% of participants aged 18-34 and nearly 50% of those aged 35-54 still prefer to communicate with their utility in their native language. All generations identified a high affinity and value for outreach and engagement in Korean or Vietnamese. Speaking your customers' language – literally and figuratively – is a key way to build trust, increase engagement, and most importantly, *meet your customer where they are on their journey.*

*"I speak Vietnamese among my community and the neighborhood, because then I understand 100% of what I'm saying and what I'm hearing, and it makes me feel more confident."*

– Dac Kien, 56, Atlanta

# Residential Insights, and How to Use Them

## Defining the Customer Journey

Built on this foundation of exploratory research, we are creating custom personas focused on segment-specific drivers, barriers, and decision-making. We are helping Georgia Power optimize impact through product, program, and service usability and experience testing. ILLUME has been working as a team with Georgia Power and ICF to weave these findings into their holistic approaches to engagement and implementation to strengthen the utility-customer relationship. For example, Georgia Power and ICF used learnings from the residential ethnography work, which highlighted existing misconceptions and education gaps about household lighting, to develop innovative and compelling educational materials about LEDs.



**Women are key decision-makers.** Women often manage budgets, influence upgrades, and decide how spaces in the home are used. Women expressed frustration that this role was not always acknowledged and that they were not taken seriously by contractors or technicians because of their gender.

*Program outreach strategies, messaging, and trade ally trainings needs to better engage women to build trust and respect, gain access, and ensure success.*

**Non-English-speaking communities are an untapped market.** We discovered that Atlanta's Korean- and Vietnamese-speaking communities tend to have similar or higher rates of homeownership, income, and education compared to the general population, and yet have limited options to communicate with their utilities in a language other than English.

*A relatively inexpensive translation of program materials can include communities that have been unable to connect with their utilities in a meaningful way.*

**Energy efficiency is a family value, even if most people don't explicitly think about it that way.** Across cultures and generations, people we spoke with talked about how they use energy and efficiency as tools to translate and pass down their ethics to their children. People use their energy bills to engage their children in contributing to the success of the family and understanding budgets. Others ask their child to turn off the lights to teach them responsibility. The primary purpose of these conversations isn't energy use, but the broader idea of limiting waste and being a good steward for your family and community.

*Terms like "energy efficiency" fail to connect with many audiences. We can better engage customers using the language they are already speaking: the language of family connection.*

**“Home” has an implicit meaning, and marketing often misses the mark.** Many energy efficiency programs use messages of comfort and safety to sell the need for efficient upgrades. However, our research showed people already feel comfortable in their homes; even if a room is drafty, it doesn’t affect the overall perception of comfort and safety people get from walking in their front door.

*Instead of using terms like “comfort,” call out more specific temperature cues or attributes of an inefficient home to better illustrate what can be addressed through energy efficiency and ensure that your messages resonate with homeowners.*

**Timelines of homeownership don’t always line up with program years.** People we spoke to described taking months or even years to make home upgrades because life gets in the way. Replacing water heaters, appliances, or lighting is no different. By continuing to be a source of information and support, customers can reach out when the time is right for that new HVAC system.

*Treating the energy efficiency journey as a relationship, not a transaction, is the most effective at connecting deeply with customers, and that means being there when they are ready to take action.*

**Customers want - and need - a reliable source of information on home maintenance and upgrades.** Replacing equipment is a major investment for homeowners, and people often don’t know who to trust. Contractors may be able to provide the right information, but homeowners are wary of getting duped or oversold. Not only that, HVAC and water heating systems are complex, and not something most customers can learn enough about on their own, which leaves people swimming in uncertainty.

*Energy efficiency programs have an opportunity to become that trusted source of information and guidance.*


## Small Business Insights, and How to Use Them

**Small businesses look to their community to help make decisions.** Small businesses are very engaged with one another, and often rely on community members for recommendations or input on decisions. This was especially common when the business owners needed reassurance that high cost decisions would be worthwhile.

*Recognizing that small businesses are often deeply embedded in their networks, outreach to local chambers of commerce or referral programs can provide the reassurance they need to take action.*

**Small businesses are looking for proof.** We found that small business owners are meticulous decision-makers, balancing their businesses’ costs and needs. Tight financial landscapes dictate small margins of error for investments; they want proof that their purchase will be worthwhile in terms of quality, aesthetics, and savings. For energy efficiency programs, the burden of proof is on the implementer. Providing the ability to see the products before committing is crucial to the decision-making process and can alleviate the burden of proof that falls on the salesperson or implementer.

*Models of try-before-you-buy, sample materials, or seeing products installed in another space can provide proof that other, similar small businesses have participated and achieved success.*



*"The lighting in my shop is part of our brand. I have carefully placed each light, picked the color of the bulb, and situated our product to create an ambiance...People come to see things in person; I need to provide them with the experience of sitting on their new couch."*

*-Suzanne, 64, Alpharetta*

## Small Businesses Speak

We followed our residential work with a similar study on small commercial customers. We conducted ride-alongs with implementation contractors and led focus groups and on-site interviews with program participants and those who had an energy assessment but did not pursue upgrades.

We found that drivers and barriers to efficiency services often have little to do with energy or money and can be highly individualized by business type, customer experience, or logistics. For example, monthly material expenses — not savings on the electric bill — are often a catalyst for participation.

The largest drivers were the quality of materials and, in turn, the frequency of replacement. Using these findings, we created participation decision trees to provide Georgia Power and ICF the insight needed to update and customize their outreach.

**Small business owners are skeptical.** Some small businesses were particularly wary of scams and looked for signals like professional contractors before participating. Several said that based only on the description, the program sounded, "too good to be true."

*In addition to ensuring that implementation teams are equipped with utility-branded materials and credentials, early outreach to customers to alert them that technicians or contractors will be in their area can boost the perception of program validity.*

**Small businesses have complex and tight timelines to complete upgrades.** Customers described how important it was for outside actors to work within their timeframe. For example, one business owner was in the middle of lease negotiations when they received their lighting audit. Despite wanting to participate, they were unable to at that time. Ultimately, when upgrading, business owners need energy efficiency programs to fit within their broader business needs.

*Flexible scheduling and ensuring that customers can reach back out to the implementation team can ensure that interested customers can participate, even if they couldn't when initially approached.*

# WHAT'S NEXT

As we move forward with this work in 2018 and 2019, the ILLUME team will build on our ethnographic and language needs studies to complete program-level journey maps, to dig deeper into the needs and drivers within diverse communities, and to expand our understanding of how changing markets will affect programs into the future. We are excited to continue serving as Georgia Power's ally in industry-leading research that uplifts programs using insight from customer voices.

## Georgia Power is a leader in exploring what's next

Since 2017, ILLUME has worked with Georgia Power to evaluate pilots and test everything from behavioral feedback to DR-enabled water heaters. Through the application of key research design principles and upfront consideration of evaluability, ILLUME is maximizing what Georgia Power learns and can apply to optimize future program design.

**Water Heater DR** - This pilot is exploring whether water heaters are the next low-hanging fruit for residential DR. We are evaluating their impact on peak load and designing surveys to understand customer interest, acceptance, and experience with the transformation in this ubiquitous home appliance.

**Bring Your Own Thermostat DR** - Our study design is enabling Georgia Power to understand the variation and persistence of behavior and the peak load impact of calling DR events through customer-purchased, connected thermostats.

**Connected Homes** - In an increasingly digital world, this pilot is determining what role Georgia Power should play. Our survey design is targeting and tracking customer motivations, experience, and expectations with home automation, and our analysis of energy consumption is quantifying program impacts.

**Low-income Multifamily** - Our experimental design is allowing Georgia Power to understand the impacts achieved through the direct installation of advanced power strips and learning thermostats in this hard-to-reach customer segment.

**Behavioral** - Three pilots are testing report-based energy use feedback hypothesized to generate small savings across large numbers of customers. Using our in-depth customer screening, sample stratification, and experimental design, we are ensuring balanced, equivalent groups for statistically unbiased impact evaluations. ■

