

GAS SOUTH

Since being formed by Cobb EMC, this natural gas company is finding success by focusing on customers.



A New Era of Growth

For any new business, getting off to a good start is critical for long-term success. Despite the economic downturn, Georgia's Gas South hit the ground running when it began operations nearly four years ago.

Gas South began operations as a wholly owned subsidiary of Cobb EMC in January 2006 after completing the purchase of Southern Company Gas' customer base. Since then, the company has grown by 35% to serve about 230,000 customers. The company competes for customers throughout the state of Georgia.

The move to Cobb EMC meant Gas South took on a much higher profile as part of Cobb EMC's overall enterprise. "With Cobb EMC's ownership came strong support for growing our customer base and earnings," said Kevin Greiner, president and CEO. "That has been a real benefit because we've gotten more attention and focus."

Because Georgia is a fully deregulated natural gas market, consumers and businesses need to choose their natural gas supplier. Gas South uses direct mail, online marketing, face-to-face sales with business and government customers, and active advertising programs to enhance the identity of its young brand and reputation. The company also participates in chambers of commerce around the state, as well as business associations of some of its key customer groups.



Kevin Greiner,
president and CEO

"We are a sponsor of the Georgia Restaurant Association, the Georgia Apartment Association, and the Georgia Hotel & Lodging Association," Greiner said. "Those organizations represent the interests of some of our key customer groups, and our view is we can't be successful unless our customers are

successful in their business. That makes it very important to be active in those organizations.”

Another way the company has been successful in raising brand awareness over a short time is by associating with trusted local entities. For example, Gas South has marketing alliances with electric membership corporations and municipal utilities around the state. Its partners promote the company’s natural gas service to their members and customers. Because of the strong relationships those organizations have with their customers, Gas South has not only raised awareness, it has added customers.

“Electric membership corporations and municipalities do their homework and pick good partners for initiatives like this,” said Greiner. “Permitting Gas South to associate with its trusted brands counts for a lot, and we in turn offer discounted rates and replicate the great customer service it provides to its members and customers.”

Customer service improvements

The company puts a premium on customer service. Gas South entered into a comprehensive customer care contract with Cobb Energy Management Corporation, which includes billing and IT services, as well as call center services provided by ProCore Solutions. Cobb Energy invested heavily in technology to ensure it can provide the highest level of service to its primary customers, Gas South and Cobb EMC, and Greiner said the company’s current technology platform is a competitive advantage. In 2007, Cobb Energy transitioned from a legacy billing system to the Oracle Utilities Customer Care and Billing software solution.

“Once Cobb Energy completed its system conversion, our customers quickly began realizing benefits in terms of service quality, new product development, and speed to market,” said Greiner. “These enhancements made Gas South more competitive.”

In addition, the company has improved its Web site for easier navigation and enhanced enrollment and customer service applications.

“Our view is anything you can do via our call center you should be able to do via our Web site. Some people don’t like going through call centers, some don’t like contacting us online,” Greiner said. “With us, customers have the choice.”

The company created other programs designed to appeal to customers as well. Its Web site has a Name Your Own Rate application. Residential customers can indicate a fixed rate

they are interested in, and, when prices drop and the rate becomes available, they get an e-mail alerting them. Instead of requiring customers to constantly monitor where rates are, this allows them to tell Gas South when they should be made aware of rate changes.

Another program Gas South sees as not only a great growth engine but also as a service to its customers is its Pay-As-You-Go program, which allows residential customers who may be having financial difficulties to receive natural gas service by paying the expected charges for gas they will use over the next 30 days. The program attracted more than 10,000 new customers during its first year and does not require an upfront deposit, a benefit for many financially challenged customers.

“Otherwise, credit-challenged consumers are forced to seek service from the state-regulated provider,” said Greiner. “We think our program is a truly competitive option for those who traditionally haven’t had many choices. Customers like it, as do nonprofit organizations that provide financial assistance and credit counseling services.”

Although its rapid growth is welcome news indeed, the company is conservative throughout all aspects of its business. This is why Gas South is making sure its staff is prepared for the potentially bright future in front of them. Employees have individual development plans they work on with their supervisor, and this year the company did 360-degree reviews, with staff reviewing managers and vice versa.

Next month, Gas South is kicking off a new series of leadership and performance management programs for managers. In addition, it arranges for speakers to come in and address prevalent needs of the company’s employees. Lastly, with a lean organization of about 50 people, employees get to experience multiple aspects of the organization, giving them the chance to transfer to different areas and departments and work on various projects.

“That keeps things fresh for our employees and improves our bench strength,” Greiner said. “We are collaborative and results oriented. We encourage our employees to work across organizational boundaries, and we believe in everyone being a student of the business.”

Gas South is a Georgia owned, operated, and focused company. It continues to look for growth opportunities, and, approaching four years since the start of operations, it is clear Gas South is off to a pretty good start. ✨

—Eric Slack