

Think Electric Safety Every Month

By Todd Munsey

The inherent dangers surrounding electricity are consistent. Regardless of the situation and independent of the circumstances, a small amount of electricity can stop your heart and a large dose will cook you like a microwave. But while these facts never change, how the message of electric safety is shared and absorbed varies widely depending on age and audience.

May was National Electric Safety Awareness Month. Unlike other campaigns, such as National Doughnut Day—which incidentally is the first Friday in June—this declaration is designed to warn people of the potentially harmful side of electricity.

When it comes to electric safety, I wonder if most of us are smarter than ... well, a second-grader.

When I asked my 8-year-old son Andrew what came to mind when I said the words “electric safety,” he said two things: “We are mostly water, and water is an excellent conductor of electricity” and “You should always stay away from downed power lines.”

The first response would be helpful to the 30-plus people in this country who are electrocuted every year when their hair dryer falls into their bathtub. The second response would have been helpful during major power outages last winter when people were driving over downed lines. (Shucks, the tires are rubber, you know.)

Most, if not all, electric utilities in this country, present “energized” safety board presentations. Typically concentrating on third-grade school children in our service territory, we also accommodate Boy Scout troops, home-schoolers and, frankly, anyone else who asks. While the kids who have witnessed a safety board demonstration are always enthralled with the antics and, more importantly, the message, invariably a parent or teacher will come up to me after and say, “I didn’t know that!”

While the board is entertaining and fun, a tastefully done video testimonial from a young man who lost an arm and a leg to an electrical contact strikes a serious note with both students and adults.

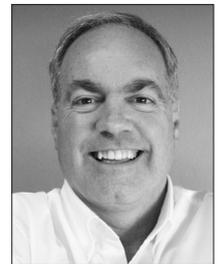
Some people need more than the message about this mostly silent, but deadly, hazard. A woodstove doesn’t typically look hot, but one touch will let you know. An electric substation looks pretty innocent, too. There are no sparks, arcs, fireworks or explosions, just a buzz and a few of those “High Voltage” signs put there to scare people away. Those folks who venture in to steal wire, equipped only with a pair of rubber-gripped wire cutters, often pay the ultimate price. The site of their remains, usually still smoldering when authorities arrive, is an amazing wake-up call, even for those of us in the industry. That’s the kind of impact, minus the gruesomeness, that we would like our message to convey to folks about electric safety.

There is a certain irony in the fact that electricity has become so commonplace its dangers almost get lost with the benefits that surround it. We are so used to having the heater, refrigerator and freezer going automatically when we are away and simply flipping the switch to bring the lights on when we return. There are not many bare wires hanging out of the walls just waiting to shock us. Most of the “shock” value of electrocution is safely nestled under the umbrella of entertainment on television, and in movies and video games. At home, it is out of sight and out of mind.

As I got up to stretch in the midst of writing this article, I noticed a little pamphlet I brought home for my son called “The ABCs of Electricity.” I immediately thought the title must stand for “Always Be Careful.” As I opened the book, I found no reference to my clever thought at all. But it is a message that applies to everyone, young and old.

Stop flipping the garbage disposal switch with those wet dishwasher hands! And stop plugging five cords into that one electrical outlet.

When you think about it, every month should be National Electric Safety Awareness Month. Take a minute to look around and see what potential hazards might exist in your home. While you are at it, if you missed National Smoke Alarm Day in March, why don’t you check those, too? ■



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