



INFORM, INSPIRE, AND MOTIVATE

with **SaLisa Berrien**

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
COI ENERGY SERVICES

You have traveled many roads in your energy journey. What has remained your inspiration to stay engaged in the energy industry?

I've remained inspired by the ability to make a difference within the energy space. There is a plethora of opportunities to improve the performance of the grid, the environment and business operations. The energy industry is a "sexy" industry that was once considered stagnant with no real innovation. Startup companies have helped change that narrative.

What do you look forward to most in the work that you do?

Making a difference. Every opportunity I have to meet and exceed customer expectations, it drives me to achieve more.

What is the most memorable lesson or skill that you have learned in the industry?

In my early career, most utilities were regulated and operated as monopolies. The customer for the electric utility had always been the public utility commission. Essentially, they cut the check. End-use customers were considered ratepayers. We all know the story very well. However, PP&L (PPL) had a different approach. As my first job out of college, they prepared me very well to understand that the ratepayer has value. They required that every Marketing Engineer complete the Integrity Selling and Consultative Selling courses to learn how to understand the customer's needs and provide services accordingly. PPL believed that if you put the customer first, even when it meant they should buy the competitor's service over yours, the customer would remember how that made them feel and will always come back to you if they could use your service. I have found this to be true. My biggest strength throughout my career has been my ability to develop long-term sticky customer relationships. I totally attribute this strength to starting with a good foundation at PPL...putting the customer first.

"Find a great mentor to accelerate your learning in the industry. Embrace the opportunities that lie ahead while making a positive impact."

What is a challenge that you have been proud to see the industry overcome?

I have seen the industry go from viewing clients as "rate-payers" to treating them as customers. In regulated and deregulated states, we are hearing more and more about customer engagement. In fact, many utilities have included this in how they measure their success. There is a lot more work to be done, but the progress to-date is promising.

What advice would you give to other women who aspire to join the energy industry?

#1 Be enlightened by keeping an open mind. Bring your creative energy to the table. Lean in more because your contributions are valuable. Fail forward. Find a great mentor to accelerate your learning in the industry. Embrace the opportunities that lie ahead while making a positive impact. If you understand the fact that you reflect a large demographic of the utility's customer base, you then understand that your intellectual capital IS valid.

Generally, when people think of careers in the utility sector, they may think “engineer,” “line worker,” or “customer service representative.” Your role is a unique one. Can you tell us about the significance of your role in the energy industry, especially as it pertains to the growth of our economy?

I would describe my role as an entrepreneur as a “customer evangelist.” My role is to solve existing and future problems facing energy customers. As a triple-bottom line company, we create opportunities to deliver more value to the bottom line; from an environmental, social and financial perspective. We provide solutions that eradicate energy waste thereby reducing greenhouse gas emissions. We create new jobs in STEM for traditional engineers and technology-focused engineers. We also create a new revenue stream for each client on our platform. This is powerful because we are revenue generators, job creators and protectors of the environment all in one.

As a workforce participant in the electric industry, do you see opportunities for you that may not exist elsewhere in energy?

The face of the electric industry is changing on many fronts. These changes have opened doors for new opportunities to take shape; ushering in diversity in thought leadership, culture and innovation. More electric utilities are seeking out professionals with a proven track record with customers, innovative spirit, understanding of the industry on both sides, and passionate about making a difference. This has afforded me the opportunity to walk through doors without knocking and take a seat at the table.

“So I recommend to anyone that wants to work in this industry to be an overachiever. Don't settle for mediocrity. Proving yourself will never hurt you. It will always make you better.”

What are some exciting things on the horizon in the electric/natural gas industry that may create opportunities for the next generation of workforce talent?

It is truly an exciting time to be in this industry. Customers are beginning to drive the demand for a diverse talent pool. This means that there are tremendous opportunities for startups and utilities to deliver more value and cross collaborate. We predict that on-demand solutions for customers will require using different technologies like Machine Learning (ML), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Blockchain, Big Data, in the near future and long term. Gen-Y and Gen-Z, get ready for the evolution of STEM careers!

As CEO of a minority-based company, do you have challenges and opportunities others do not necessarily see or have?

Yes. The first challenge is overcoming the perception others have that you're not qualified, because you don't look like, walk like or talk like what a traditional company in this industry reflects. Minorities are a small percentage of the electric utility industry workforce. For African Americans, that number is even smaller at less than 10%. This is a highly technical field typically ran by white male engineers. We are making progress with more women moving up the leadership ranks. However, you typically find very few African American women in leadership. I overcome the perception by working diligently to meet and exceed my customer expectations, thereby creating a positive track record resulting in existence proof. As a triple minority, I must prove myself, day in and day out, that I am qualified to get the job done. I am up for the challenge!

Have those opportunities opened doors for you that otherwise would not exist?

Although I have not been presented with opportunities that my non-minority counterparts have received, we are thriving! Programs like the Morgan Stanley Multicultural Innovation Lab exists to even the playing field. We are not where we need to be as an industry on diversity but we are making progress. So I recommend to anyone that wants to work in this industry to be an overachiever. Don't settle for mediocrity. Proving yourself will never hurt you. It will always make you better. Honestly, it is the quality of COI Energy's technology and solutions that has drawn customers to us.

Describe the energy industry using one word, and share with us why you chose this word.

“INTENTIONAL.”

As we move the industry forward, we will need to be intentional about how we innovate, engage, and serve the billions of customers globally. If the industry incorporates the “Platinum Rule” in all it does, everyone will win. Be Intentional!

The annual Florida's Women in Energy Leadership Forum (FWELF) aims to promote opportunities in the energy industry by recognizing the success that women leaders in the energy industry have demonstrated in growing Florida's economy and diversifying an already tremendous workforce.