

Women of Wind Energy Rebrands

WoWE becomes WRISE as it expands its focus to all renewables and broadens its core philosophy.

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After 12 years as Women of Wind Energy, the nonprofit organization is rebranding its image as its focus on renewables evolves.

Not only does that mean an expansion of its core philosophy, but also a new name and logo to go along with it.

As of May 16, Women of Wind Energy is now Women of Renewable Industries and Sustainable Energy (WRISE).

In addition to programs to help recruit and maintain women in the wind industry, it will now expand that role to other areas of renewable energy, according to Executive Director Kristen Graf.

“While our mission has been about renewable energy all along, this is a moment in time for us to kick the evolution of our work beyond just the wind-industry base,” she said. “There’s been a lot of demand from our membership and from our chapters to be working across some other technologies as well as from our corporate sponsors and from the industry.”

MORE DIVERSE INDUSTRY

Graf said the industry is becoming more diverse with some wind companies working in solar and energy storage as well as law firms and finance organizations that work across the energy spectrum.

“There’s a lot more overlap between the work that’s going on across all the renewable energy space, and in the end, the issues around advancing and retaining women are pretty similar,” she said.



WRISE

Women of Renewable Industries and Sustainable Energy

Nuances exist depending on the size of the organizations or the maturity of the industry, but a lot of the work is similar, according to Graf.

“We really think it’s a great moment in time and opportunity to be supporting women across all those technologies,” she said. “Especially as women sort of move around in the technologies over their careers.”

WoWE has been around since 2005, and it has come a long way since its humble beginnings as a luncheon at a WINDPOWER show in Denver. But even that impromptu luncheon showed the demand to get women more involved in renewable energy.

After being founded by a small group of women who were frustrated at the lack of women in the industry, particularly at national conferences and as company executives, the group pooled its own money and, along with some money from friends and a few forward-thinking wind companies at the time, the group started the Rudd Mayer Fellowship, one of Women of Wind

Energy’s key pieces, according to Graf. Mayer’s work in the wind industry earned her national recognition where she promoted Colorado utilities’ wind-power programs.

The group brought some young women who were students and graduates to the annual wind conference.

BIG TURNOUT

“We hosted our first-ever lunch,” Graf said. “It was a bit of a last-minute idea. So they got a room in a hotel near the conference center and were expecting maybe 20 or 30 folks to show up, and had a huge room full of people — about 120, almost all women. A lot of people were sort of blown away. And I think it was the beginning of recognition that there was a clear demand for that kind of work and activity.”

At the next luncheon in Pittsburgh, the women attending wanted to keep the momentum going in between conferences, according to Graf.

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“And that’s really the organic way our chapters got going,” she said.

But coming up with a name came with a few surprises.

“They wanted to be Women of Wind, but realized conflicts with both Wind on the Wires as well as a large organization known as Women of the Wind that was focused on women who ride motorcycles,” Graf said. “So there was an early decision to shift to Women of Wind Energy.”

With an identity in place, the momentum continued to grow as the group’s steering committee decided to get serious in 2009 when it obtained some seed money, hired an executive director, and went through the incorporation process, she said.

“Now we have over 35 chapters around the U.S. and a few in Canada doing all the work as WoWE as an organization,” Graf said.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING

Over its 12 years, WoWE would focus on recruiting more women to work in the renewable energy field while helping to retain and advance the women already working in it, according to Graf.

“We work with individual women on their career path and trajectory but also work with companies on some of their institutional policies and the things they can be doing to both hire more women and to keep the great women they have,” she said. “And we work with all the great women and men across our network to talk about renewable energy in different ways wherever they are.”

And WoWE had developed quite the arsenal of tools to meet those goals.

“We have a leadership forum that we host every year in the fall right before AWEA’s fall symposium,” Graf said. “We have webinars. We have a mentoring program that’s both one-on-one mentoring but also peer-group mentoring. We now have Woman of the Year Rising Star and a WoWE champion. And last year, for the first time, we worked with the Wind Energy Founda-

tion to add a new fellowship that’s specifically for women in wind-technician training programs called the Wind at our Backs Fellowship.”

MAKING STRIDES

And with the rebranding, Graf said she expects the organization will continue to make strides in getting and keeping women in renewables beyond wind.

“I’m hopeful that in the long run, it will mean more chapters,” she said. “We still have some work to do in terms of visibility in the other technologies, but we’ve been working on that over the last couple of years. It’s an easy opportunity, right away, for the chapters that we already have in place. Some of them are already working across technologies.”

The mix in the beginning will tilt a little toward the wind side because the organization has so much experience with that part of the renewables industry, but Graf sees that changing.

“It’ll be a little bit heavier on wind just because that’s where we’ve had the strength and visibility and a lot of our sponsors,” she said. “But even that mix of who we’re already working with had begun transitioning on its own, in a way, with a lot of our individual members already working across more technologies. Some of that had already started to transition. Our goal is to provide value across all the technologies.”

Graf said a large component of the rebranding has been to think through their programming and see what changes will create value.

“There are some programs that probably won’t change that much,” she said. “Our webinars, for example, we can continue to evolve that, and maybe it means we just try to add a few more to the mix, so that we’re covering things well. But other things may change more dramatically.”

As an example, Graf said their leadership forum at the AWEA fall symposium might change after this year.

“That just feels too wind heavy, and it’s really such a strong event for us, we

want it to be as open as possible,” she said. “Having it connected (with wind only) feels more exclusive.”

REBRANDING TALK

The idea of rebranding Women of Wind Energy had been bounced around the organization for years, but it wasn’t until November 2016 when talks became more focused.

“Upfront, there was a lot of scoping and making sure this was the right decision,” Graf said.

WoWE began working with Wilkinson and Associates, a Washington, D.C.-based branding agency, that helped with background work, membership surveys, and interviews that covered the breadth and depth of the organization as well as the stakeholders’ vested interest, according to Graf.

“When we had all of the results from that pulled together, we had some healthy conversations, and they came back with an initial round of names,” she said. “Definitely selecting the new name was a challenging, but great, part of the process. Everybody loved Women of Wind Energy, and our acronym WoWE (wow-ee) was really fun, so we had a lot of brand loyalty around that. So trying to find something that captured that same enthusiasm in energy, but also felt like it was inclusive of this broader spectrum and picture we were trying to encompass was a challenge.”

A similar process went into the new logo design and incorporating all the different facets of the organization’s new goals and philosophies.

“We gave them a pretty challenging piece,” Graf said. “I think in the end we came up with something really nice, but it is intended to show an evolution from the existing logo.”

The rebranding is meant to not only move the organization into the future, but to show how far the organization has come since its origins in 2005. And another positive for the organization’s rebranding: This time, WRISE didn’t have to compete with motorcycles. ♪