

Point Click Switch puts energy behind its growth plans

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Phil Croskey is looking to spark wider interest in his energy rate comparison business this year.

His Baltimore startup, Point Click Switch, allows business owners and residential customers to compare energy rates for free and switch providers to save money. Think of it as Expedia for electricity and natural gas instead of hotel rates.

Croskey, the CEO and co-founder, and partners Paul Clary and Jason Schwartzberg bootstrapped the company in 2010. It has been slowly growing for the past few years, but Croskey said 2013 will be the year Point Click Switch amps things up.

Croskey hopes to triple Point Click Switch's revenue and grow its residential customer base from 5,000 to 30,000 this year, and the company is taking a three-pronged approach to hit those goals through marketing, spreading services to other states and capitalizing on low energy rates.

The company's first major marketing push — three television spots featuring Ravens wide receiver Torrey Smith — is set to hit the airwaves in first quarter 2013. Mission Media helped Point Click Switch develop the ads. Until now, the company relied on word of mouth, community association meetings and informal marketing to build its reputation.

By the year's end, Croskey also hopes to double the manpower of his company — currently three employees strong.

Marylanders have had the option to choose their energy provider since the industry was deregulated in 1999, but only 5 percent of the state had taken advantage of switching providers by the time Croskey and his partners founded Point Click Switch a decade later, he said. Throughout the country, 18 states allow residents to choose their energy suppliers, according to the U.S. Energy



From left, Point Click Switch principals Paul Clary, Jason Schwartzberg and Phil Croskey want to grow their customer base to 30,000 this year.

Information Administration.

Croskey said Maryland residents have become more savvy to the fact that they can choose their energy provider, but Point Click Switch still needs to spread the word for the company to take off.

"The customer bases are becoming more educated," Croskey said. "We want now for those customers who switched, when they come up for renewal, to know that Point Switch Click is the place they can go when they switch their supplier."

Only about 20 percent of Maryland residents have switched their supplier since it became an option in 1999, according to the Maryland Public Service Commission. Jim McDonnell, COO of the Bethesda-based energy consultant Avalon Energy Services, said there is room for Point Click Switch to recruit residential customers from that untapped market.

Jonathan Weinstock, president of Nations Photo Lab in Hunt Valley, a Point Click Switch customer, said there are

plenty of business owners who could benefit from saving on electricity by choosing another provider. It's only a matter of awareness.

"Business owners are always looking for ways to cut costs," Weinstock said. "I don't think people realize this is even an option."

Point Click Switch makes money from the energy providers per customer it recruits. Croskey declined to share Point Click Switch's revenue, but said the company is profitable.

The company currently operates in Maryland and Illinois but it is eyeing other states that allow energy choice. By the end of 2013, Croskey hopes to expand the business into Washington, D.C., New York and Ohio.

"They are all very vibrant markets for choice," McDonnell said.

Point Click Switch has to get bonded in other states before entering their markets and receive a license from each state's public utility commission. But some of the energy providers Point Click Switch

works with operate in multiple territories, which streamlines the process.

Croskey does not worry about the competition. But there's definitely some out there — among them, Make the Switch USA in Connecticut, Plug In Illinois, SaveOnEnergy.com and Power2Switch.com.

McDonnell said the savings have been huge for customers who have switched suppliers. But, he said, it is important for customers to read the fine print of contracts with new suppliers. Low energy rates coupled with fees tacked on by certain contract terms and conditions can sometimes cost customers more.

"To me it's not an educated sort of decision on the part of the customer," McDonnell said.

However, switching suppliers does not have to be a one-time thing, and Point Click Switch has helped customers take advantage of lower rates after they initially changed providers. Johnette Richardson, who lives in the North Harford Road community near Parkville, has switched her home energy provider twice since she came on board with Point Click Switch in 2011 — from Baltimore Gas and Electric Co. to Washington Gas to ConEdison Solutions.

"In my household we just wanted to save money," said Richardson, executive director of Belair-Edison Neighborhoods Inc. "We have shaved about \$100 off our bill per month."

Most residential customers save between \$200 and \$500 annually by using Point Click Switch, while small businesses can save between \$1,000 and \$5,000 on utility costs, Croskey said.

Although commercial customers account for most of Point Click Switch's business, Croskey wants to focus on growing his residential clients. He plans to partner with nonprofits that serve low-income communities in the coming year to get the energy savings to those who need it most.

Coin toss: Area executives give their predictions on the Ravens

Ever get that psychic feeling?

We figure there's no better opportunity for folks to check the power of their third eye than the hugely anticipated Ravens-Patriots rematch in the AFC Championship game Jan. 18.

We asked a few business executives across Baltimore to give their best predictions for the game.

Their predictions weren't what you call surprising, but assuming they're right, let's see who comes closest to the spread.



Ripken Jr.

Patriots 24."

— Cal Ripken Jr., Major League Baseball Hall of Famer and CEO of Ripken Baseball

"We have to put a lot of pressure on



Ruppersberger

open up the running game with some 10- to 12-yard plays in the middle. We can't be as predictable on the running game as we were last week against Denver. Ravens 34-Patriots 31."

— Congressman C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger

"The Ravens offensive line must give Joe the time to throw the ball like they have the past two weeks. Our defense has to put pressure on Tom Brady early in the game to minimize his TDs and our special teams have to stay in their lanes. Ravens 31-Patriots 28."

— Jody Berg, CEO of MediaWorks

"The Ravens rattle the usually very composed Tom Brady, Ray Lewis



Corrigan

makes a big play to seal the deal and Joe Flacco continues to disprove his doubters. Ravens 27-Patriots 21."

— Lee Corrigan, president of Corrigan Sports Enterprises and organizer of the Baltimore Running Festival



Baader

— Michael J. Baader, partner-in-charge of Venable LLP's Baltimore office

"Last week was magical and I have to admit that I didn't think we would pull it off. The Pats are a great team but this is our year and I think we will knock them

off in a game that will surprise a lot of people. Ravens 34-Patriots 17."

— John Maroon, president of Maroon PR

"The Ravens are the Team of Destiny and they will avenge last year's loss to the Patriots by winning 31 to 23 with Joe Flacco again throwing bombs to Torrey Smith and Ray Rice and Bernard Pierce making the tough yards on the ground. In Ray We Trust all the way to New Orleans."

— Paul A. Tiburzi, Baltimore managing partner of DLA Piper



Baynes

amazing team both on and off the field! Ravens 28, Patriots 24."

— Casey Baynes, executive director of Casey Cares Foundation