

CUSTOMER SERVICE IN THE NEW AGE

With the energy industry changing rapidly, natural gas utilities are increasingly looking to new technologies to drive customer service's digital future—and exceed customer expectations. **BY LIN GRENSING-POPHAL**

Keeping customer satisfaction high isn't easy in an era of increasing customer demand, environmental and economic challenges, and ever-emerging technology. But natural gas utilities have been able to consistently do just that.

J.D. Power's 2014 Gas Utility Residential Customer Service Study indicated that customer satisfaction with residential gas utilities improved for a third consecutive year. Overall satisfaction averaged 644 on a 1,000-point scale in 2014, up from 627 in 2011.

Business customer satisfaction is also improving, according to J.D. Power's 2015 Gas Utility Business Customer Satisfaction Survey, up to 695 in 2015 compared with 687 in 2014.

As utilities strive to maintain—and grow—levels of satisfaction among all customers, they are finding opportunities and challenges. Chief among them, both from a gas operations and communication standpoint, are significantly elevated customer service concerns throughout the industry.

New Technology, New Opportunities, New Expectations

The American Gas Association has always been ahead of the curve in advancing best practices in customer service. For example, AGA's annual Customer Service Conference & Exposition, held in partnership with the Edison Electric Institute, is a major undertaking that focuses on programs and services to support a better future in customer service. This event also maximizes the opportunity to gain value from a much broader range of insights and interactions, which is especially critical in today's evolving customer service environment.

The energy industry is changing rapidly, requiring new approaches to addressing customer needs while still meeting regulatory requirements—approaches that can be fueled by technology, from cloud-based services and



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analytics to social media and mobility.

“With the explosion of social media, renewable energy, cheap and abundant natural gas and customer demands for perfect reliability, the successful professional needs to be educated and engaged,” said Joseph Forline, vice president of customer solutions at Public Service Electric and Gas Co.

According to Forline, one of the most pressing issues facing the industry is customer technology and integration of customer communication channels. The tools are out there, but now utilities must ask themselves how they can move from simply communicating with the customer to meeting the needs and interests of each one while providing this service in a cost-effective way and across their entire demographic profile.

Penni McLean-Conner, chief customer officer and senior vice president of customer group for Eversource Energy (formerly Northeast Utilities), points to these same issues, noting the significant impact of technology. “The movement to digital communications is growing exponentially,” she said. “This growth brings both opportunities and challenges to meet the customer demands efficiently, reliably and securely.”

One key trend is consumers moving to online or digital channels to conduct business with their utilities. McLean-Conner noted that, for her utility, online transactions have gone from 5 percent of all transactions in 2002 to 60 percent today. Continuing to develop these opportunities across the entire customer experience is a focus, along with mining the information from their online actions to better serve their needs.

“Wouldn’t it be great if our customer service reps in the call center actually knew the customer had tried to complete their pay-

ment arrangement online and couldn’t do so and that’s why they’re calling?” she said.

The growth of distributed generation presents two areas of opportunity—serving customers who are interested as well as serving providers in the space. Identifying the systems needed to provide this support is top-of-mind for utility executives, McLean-Conner said.

Natural gas utilities are also already developing best practices in the use of new technology, both to better serve business customers and use this technology to aid those in the field. “There is a lot of discussion on how we can enhance our processes and field operations to create a better customer experience,” she said.

These are the types of issues, according to McLean-Conner, where she and other utility executives look to organizations such as AGA/EEI to keep them up-to-date, “bringing together the best of breed” in vendors and speakers.

Best Practice Insights: Web Chat

Vectren Corp. is a prime example. Based in Evansville, Indiana, Vectren was an early adopter of opportunities made available by new technology to connect with customers. The utility implemented Web chat in February 2013 and hasn’t missed a beat since then, Performance Assurance Manager Cindy Dossett said. Dossett will be speaking about Vectren’s experiences with Web chat at the AGA/EEI conference.

Using a soft launch as a test before widely promoting the service, Vectren placed a chat icon on its “Contact Us” Web page and immediately began receiving chat requests from customers—39 on the first day, Dossett said. During the next few months, Vectren expanded the chat function, putting

the icon on more pages that represented content likely to prompt a question or customer inquiry. Soon, volume reached about 2,000 chats a month. Today, “We are currently seeing volumes around 4,500 per month,” she said.

Vectren has found that just about any type of customer inquiry can be handled through chat, with the exception of bill payment. The highest Web chat volume is for general questions; move-ins are the next most common. That’s somewhat surprising, she said, given that move-ins can take some time to complete. But, “I think people like the ability to multitask while they’re providing us with information.”

Customers who call speak to trained agents, who are in a high-demand role. “Agents look at it as a perk to be on the Web chat team,” Dossett said. Agents must undergo a rigorous selection process that involves an assessment of their written communication skills and ability to multitask—and they’re also tested with a series of “simulated chats” to see how they might perform in real-time situations.

The learning experience is ongoing for Vectren. At the close of each chat, visitors are presented with an option to take a brief online survey. About 60 percent take advantage of it, and feedback has been consistently positive. “We’ve had a really positive reaction to our Web chat process,” Dossett said. “We’re providing the experience the customers expect and allowing them an opportunity to contact us through the channel of their choice.”

Best Practice Insights: Outage Communications

That kind of positive experience is also much needed in the often stressful situa-

tion when outages occur. Jack Hierholzer, an electric distribution technology specialist with Gulf Power Co. in Pensacola, Florida, will speak at the 2015 AGA/EEI conference about his company's use of an outage communications system that provides customers with access to maps, automated alerts and mobile apps to track and learn about outages in their areas.

It's a great example of how utilities are leveraging technology to improve service—something that consumers are increasingly demanding. The options have been rolled out over the past 18 months, beginning with the online outage maps.

“What we're finding is that, overwhelmingly, customers are going to the outage map when they have a problem,” Hierholzer said. “We're [also] finding a small amount of customers taking us up on the proactive notifications and the app.”

While it's too early to tell what impact these tools could have on call center demand, according to Hierholzer, the goal is more about boosting customer satisfaction. “[Reducing call center demand] is always the hope, but I think in practice it's rarely the

reality. What you do is you're able to provide customers more information when they want it and hopefully increase satisfaction.”

For instance, he said, during an ice storm last January, the call center received 40,000 to 50,000 calls while the outage map had 160,000 page views, giving a majority of their customers the ability to find the information they wanted when they wanted it.

These types of options are becoming increasingly popular and increasingly in demand, and that demand is likely to continue, Hierholzer said, as the overall utility customer base comes to represent more of the millennial audience. He recommends that utilities draw upon their own personal experiences when considering how they might use technology to serve their customers.

“Do you use Amazon? Do you use your bank's app? Do you use any sort of airline app? You start to get a feel for where things are going in general.” While utilities aren't likely to become “the next Amazon,” he said, “our customers may be comparing us to airlines and banks—and their expectations are increasing.”

In addition to considering their own experiences, Hierholzer recommends that utilities take the time to listen to their customers to find out what they value. And, he cautions, don't think you can develop a tool or app and your work is done.

“These are things that require care and feeding and constant evolution,” he said. “Customers expect to see changes over time and continual improvement.” That means, he said, that utilities can't build something and then stop development. It also means that they shouldn't strive for perfection when they introduce these options.

“It's OK to put it out there in a less than perfect state as long as the essential function is there,” he said. Doing that, and providing a path for feedback, can help you learn from the voice of the customer to find opportunities for future upgrades and improvements. ♦



2015 AGA/EEI CUSTOMER SERVICE CONFERENCE & EXPOSITION

April 6–9, 2015 – Omni Shoreham, Washington, D.C.

Discerning customers expect more. That's why this year's AGA/EEI Customer Service Conference & Exposition is a “can't miss” event. Utility professionals from every level of the organization, and representing a range of roles from customer service-specific to operations, administration and leadership, will come together to learn, share, network and grow.

This year's topics are timely and cutting edge. For instance:

- **Customer service in a vulnerable world.**

How your utility can be impacted by cyber threats; what you need to know to be prepared; and how to protect your customers' interests.

- **Expanding customer contact through Web chat.**

As the role of the call center continues to change significantly to encompass other modes of communication, most notably online forms, how to incorporate chat into your service model.

- **Removing barriers to house the homeless.**

A community-based model to help those struggling to pay their energy bills and afford housing.

- **Using various social media channels.**

How to interact with, listen and learn from customers through social media through one utility's successful practices.

And much more, including the ability to interact with dozens of vendors, other attendees and speakers. For an agenda and other information, visit www.aga.org.