Goodbye phone calls, hello mobile apps. That’s just one of the ways natural gas utilities are improving how they communicate with their customers — a necessity as customers increasingly expect the same experience from their utility that they receive from Amazon and other retailers. BY ERIC JOHNSON

When it comes to communicating with gas customers, one thing is becoming increasingly clear—the days of black-and-white bills, help desks and lengthy phone calls are rapidly coming to an end.

“You have to be very aware that there’s a group of customers who wants to walk into an office and who wants to hand you a payment because that’s the way they’ve always done it,” said Greg Zeller, director of customer care for Puget Sound Energy. “But that’s a declining base. The one that’s growing—and the one you’ve got to pay increasing attention to—are the customers who want to interact with you hassle-free and quickly. And they want to do that through a smartphone or a web service.”

Influenced by an ever-expanding click-first retail environment (think Amazon), this new breed of customer expects a similar experience from the utility sector.

Moving Beyond the Spendometer
At DTE Energy in Michigan, the development of smart meter infrastructure got the utility thinking about ways it could provide value to its customers beyond the smart meter reading capabilities.

“How could we provide customers information that would help them save money, help them manage their bills and help them do a variety of other things?” said Joel Miller, project manager for the DTE Insight app, one of two energy applications developed by DTE. “After doing some benchmarking, we were excited about mobile apps and decided that if we were going to invest in new technology, the mobile platform was really where we should focus our efforts.”

But not all mobile apps provided the kind of insight DTE Energy was looking to give. Most gave customers real-time information but didn’t tell the customers what they could and should do with that information. As Miller puts it, they were “spendometers” — applications that told customers how fast they were spending money. The apps were helpful, but they weren’t delivering everything customers were asking for.

“What our customers were telling us was simple: Help me understand what’s
going on in my home over time and help me identify the opportunities I have to reduce my usage, whether it’s for financial reasons, global reasons or personal interest reasons,” he said.

So, what can customers do with the DTE Insight app?

The data they get from the gas meter is a daily reading presented in two basic viewpoints: a daily view (which can expand to a weekly and monthly look at energy usage with a year-over-year comparison) and a comparison of the individual customer’s usage against other DTE Insight users.

“We give them the ability to do some comparisons, not only against themselves, but also against what the community is doing,” Miller said. This includes factors like weather. “For the gas customer, usage is mostly weather-driven, so they can see whether their usage is increasing proportionally to other people in the community. Every usage screen also has a weather overlay, so you can always look at it in comparison to what happens in the weather.”

Such comparisons help identify areas for saving money. “What’s interesting is customers are finding they’re wasting energy,” said Beth Crick, senior communications specialist. “They’re seeing it through the app, and they’re making changes to stop wasting—and they’re saving money because of it.”

Much like they can with mobile phone carriers, DTE Insight app customers can set usage goals and receive push notifications as they progress toward their goals. A budget feature also allows a customer to project what a bill is likely going to be, eliminating those surprises that sometimes occur when the bill arrives.

And now, thanks to the DTE Energy Mobile app, that bill is easier to read and far easier to act on. If customers monitoring usage on the DTE Insight app decide they want to pay their bill, the DTE Energy Mobile app is only a click away. There, customers can download a pdf of their bill, look at a graphical representation of their usage, make a payment or enroll in other DTE programs. They also have the ability to report and track any issues with their service through the app’s Outage Center.

“We try to make it a lot easier for our customers to transition from receiving that bill in the mail every month, not really being aware of what’s going on and getting these surprises, to getting real-time information so that there are fewer surprises,” said Eric Pokriefka, manager of DTE’s customer service mobile and social media activities.

The DTE Mobile app, which is approaching a milestone of 300,000 customers, was launched in 2011, and the DTE Insight app was launched in 2014. Both are marketed to consumers through a variety of channels under the slogan “Know Your Own Power.”

“The intent is to enable and empower our customers to know more about what’s going on with their energy consumption and their energy use and then give them the tools and technology to interact with DTE in a very efficient manner, whenever and however they feel they want to do that,” Pokriefka said.

Ultimately, it’s a win-win, said Peter Ternes, communications manager for DTE Gas.

“The win for the utility is that more customers using the technology allows us to grow and expand our customer service abilities,” he said. “The win for the customers is that we’re giving them what they’re saying they want.”

Making Customers’ Lives Easier

San Diego Gas & Electric launched the SDG&E Mobile app in October 2012 and has developed several updated versions since then to improve existing features and add new functionality, based on customer feedback. The app gives customers the chance to observe their energy habits and examine the peaks and valleys of their usage. They can also compare their usage...
Face-to-face interaction might sound like an old-school customer service tactic, but for one utility, what’s old is new again.

For the last 2½ years, Puget Sound Energy representatives have been going door-to-door in communities across its service area. The goal: to promote energy efficiency by signing people up for a Home Energy Assessment. The HEA is a free service that gives PSE customers advice on how to make their homes more energy efficient, including a report detailing the recommendations and a list of PSE rebate offers.

“It’s a basic assessment outlining things a person can do to improve the energy efficiency of their home,” said Pinky Vargas, outreach manager. “The certified specialists focus on the big-ticket items that may be contributing to energy losses—insulation, water heaters, heating systems, lights and appliances—with the goal to get people to take the first step toward home energy efficiency.”

Each year, PSE, which provides gas and electric service to 1.4 million customers in the Seattle area and throughout Washington state, chooses 10 cities and knocks on between 700 and 1,000 doors. For example, in Bellevue, a community where PSE provides natural gas and electric service, the utility knocked on 1,034 doors and received a 25 percent sign-up rate for the assessment.

“Going door-to-door is no small undertaking. The process includes using intelligence resources to identify customer segments and create mailing and walking lists. It requires coordinated marketing resources to mail postcards to each neighborhood, create leave-behind materials and develop messaging and scripts for the canvassers. And finally, program resources are needed to track leads, generate referrals and coordinate with qualified partners to complete the assessments.”

“The canvassing activity opens the conversation,” Vargas said. “It gives people the sense that they are part of something bigger than their own efficiency, and we use that opportunity to engage them in a conversation about energy efficiency.”

That conversation usually starts with disbelief.

“Most people can’t believe PSE is doing something for free because we’re a utility,” she said. “Believe it or not, that’s one of our biggest barriers to having people sign up—they can’t believe we can be doing a ‘free’ assessment.”

To combat that impression, the door-to-door teams never do an assessment on the spot: They leave materials behind, which gives customers an opportunity to think it over, research the program and feel comfortable with the idea before they agree to let someone into their home.

“Even if they don’t take an upgrade measure right then, at least maybe a year from now when they realize they really do need to upgrade their water heater or clothes washer, they might remember that PSE had something to help,” Vargas said.

Beyond that, there’s the fundamental power of communicating the message to a skeptical public that PSE isn’t just out to make money. To some people it might seem counterintuitive, but reducing energy consumption is in everyone’s best interests.

“Don’t you want to make money?” is probably the No. 1 question I receive all the time,” Vargas said. “And I just tell them that if we can keep everyone operating at more efficient levels it means we don’t have to build more power plants, we have less infrastructure to build and less impact on the environment. That’s good for us, and it’s ultimately good for the customer.” —E.J.
including teasers in the customer newsletter, employee training, videos for the website and social media, and finally, an extensive instructional insert explaining the changes included with the first new bill.

Because the change was so significant, Hemmer said, Ameren Illinois has made a commitment to the team that it isn’t going to make any major modifications to the bill design for a year.

“From a cosmetic perspective, we want to take a year and really absorb the feedback that we get from our customers,” she said. “And then, when we see common themes in what people are suggesting, that’s when we’re going to determine what changes we should make.”

So far, the comments about the new design have been overwhelmingly positive and align with the objectives the company outlined.

The new bill, which launched April 11, is available to both gas and electric customers and is part of an overall customer communication strategy that includes online alerts as customers approach certain usage thresholds plus alerts for approaching due dates.

“We are always looking at ways to make our customers’ lives easier, whether it’s through a new bill statement or changes to our process in terms of call-in service or more customer-friendly updates to our website,” said Hemmer. “We’re always attempting to listen to the needs of our customers and put new features in place that will make things easier for them.”

Beyond the Call Center
That kind of customer-first performance drives many of the communications plans at Puget Sound Energy in Washington state, where it doubled-down on the idea of improving the entire scope of customer communications.

“We actually formed a business unit around driving the customer experience and bringing the meld of operations and technology together,” said PSE’s Zeller. “We didn’t just get 10 people together to figure this out and then send them back to their previous jobs after six months.”
These people left their old jobs to concentrate on this.”

With neighbors including Starbucks, Amazon, Nordstrom, Microsoft and Google, expectations are naturally high.

“The people who work in these places and code there—they have a pretty high expectation of your technology and your performance,” Zeller said. “They’re young, they’re here and they were raised on having instant access to information and communication.”

With those customers in mind—the growing base of customers who would rather just open an app, do their business and move on with life—PSE turned the typical call center experience on its head.

“Really, our CEO came in and said, ‘You know—it’s aspirational, but let’s do our job so well that no one needs to call us,’” Zeller said. The utility started by looking at the reasons people were calling them.

“We decided we could do better at executing our first-touch processes so our customers get what they need the first time they talk to us, no matter where it is across the company,” he said. “So we’re really focused on process improvement and perfecting those channels that really solve the customer’s problem at the point they want to solve it and in the channel they want to solve it, before it becomes a call center issue.”

He’s fond of asking the question: Has anyone ever actually talked to anyone at Amazon?

It’s not about getting rid of the calls and hiding from the customer, Zeller stresses, but about interacting with the customer on his or her terms. However, when the customer does have to use the call center, PSE is training its agents to listen better to the customer’s questions and to expedite their response.

“If you’re an agent and they’re asking you a question you can’t answer, we’re going to bet that within three minutes of the start of the call you’re going to know it,” Zeller said. “If you don’t have the answer, we want you to tell them right then that you’re going to have to get some assistance rather than leave them on the phone for another 17 minutes while you fumble your way through.”

PSE is also investing in predictive analytics, so when customers call, the agent is armed from the start with all the necessary information to help.

If, for example, a customer is calling from an area where there is a known gas odor, the agent can start the conversation by asking if the call is in regard to the gas odor in that specific location and then follow up with some safety tips or other targeted messaging.

Or maybe the last communication with the customer was regarding a high gas bill. When the agent gets the call, the customer’s bill is already up, the temperature data is there and the agent is ready to provide answers efficiently and without delay.

Ultimately, however, the goal continues to be making the customer experience bigger than the call center.

“We’re really trying to fix everything, but this year we’re focused on the short-term wins,” Zeller said, “[including] a better mobile app, bill pay, predictive analytics, awareness from end-to-end across the company. Those quick wins are coming in this year, and then we have longer-term solutions that will just keep coming in as we move forward.”

In short, it’s about taking care of the customers so they can move on to other things.

“Customers just want us to solve a problem,” Zeller said. “They’re not looking for new friends.”

The Big Picture

Beyond giving customers what they want, every point of contact is one more chance to create a positive impression with the customer while also furthering the important cause of energy efficiency and energy savings.

“If you think about it, just sending out a utility bill is an opportunity to make an impression on your customers,” Ameren Illinois’ Hemmer said. “We know most of our customers think of paying their bill as a necessary evil, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t try to do whatever possible to make their experience a little more positive.”