Improving the Customer Experience for Utilities Consumers

Lowering Costs for a Strategic Imperative
INTRODUCTION

Across the utilities industry, several factors are making customer service a strategic priority while placing a stronger emphasis on lowering costs. Competition with other providers, new technologies, rising customer expectations, and the need to support more sophisticated customer interactions are driving the need to deliver a better customer experience. At the same time, budgets for adding customer service personnel are constrained.

The sweet spot for utility companies is found in process improvements and technologies that simultaneously enhance customer service and lower costs. For example, systems that streamline payments, reminders, and collections serve to reduce contact center calls, minimize shut-offs, and directly improve the customer experience. Automated systems that enable customers to get information and perform transactions via self-service free up representatives to handle more complex customer inquiries, resolve problems, and allow more time for service upselling and new customer acquisition. And, systems that can push important notifications and updates to a large number of customers via phone or text message provide the type of proactive, multi-channel communication that builds customer loyalty and satisfaction.

This paper explores the customer experience challenges faced by utility companies, as well as strategies and technologies for addressing them, including advanced IVR (Interactive Voice Response) and multi-channel self-service solutions from Voxeo. These strategies include ways to:

- Improve and automate inbound customer interactions
- Meet the growing demand for multi-channel and mobile communications
- Become more proactive with interactive outbound notifications
- Maintain design, development, and deployment flexibility
- Use cross-channel analytics to continually fine tune and improve service

THE DEMAND FOR IMPROVED CUSTOMER SERVICE AND THE NEED FOR LOWER COSTS

The sharper focus on customer service in utilities is being driven by several dynamics. Deregulation and smart grid technologies are intensifying competition and giving utility consumers more options on rates and usage patterns. In competitive markets, consumer expectations for quality of service rise substantially. Likewise, as consumers take more control over their energy consumption, utilities will need to put systems in place to effectively handle increasingly complex customer interactions.

Like their counterparts in the electricity sector, water and natural gas utilities are also facing more demand for quality customer service. A recent CMO Council survey found that more than 70 percent of customers are seeking to lower their bills and looking to their utility companies for solutions. The survey also found that among the top customer complaints for utility companies are increased costs without an increase in service, long wait times for customer service, and service outages. Consumers also reported a willingness to engage with utilities to lower costs; among those who recalled receiving specific information on savings, payment options, or bill reduction, close to half purchased recommended services or items.

Of course, improvements in customer service must be balanced with the need to deliver them cost-effectively. Doubling the contact center staff is rarely an option, and would likely be insufficient anyway. Instead, a more holistic approach is in order—one that includes optimizing business processes, streamlining customer communications, and replacing aging infrastructure. To protect eroding profit margins, utilities are increasingly weighing the advantages of outsourcing and cloud solutions to eliminate capital-intensive upgrades to customer-facing technologies. They are also looking to streamline development and reduce ongoing maintenance efforts with an architecture that enables reuse of core automation components across multiple self-service channels. As always, these activities must be
performed against a backdrop of regulatory requirements for security and data privacy, and in accordance with IT requirements that include scalability, flexibility, and integration with legacy systems.

**IMPROVE AND AUTOMATE INBOUND CUSTOMER INTERACTIONS OVER THE PHONE**

Many utility companies considering off-shore call center operations to cut costs find that the savings are frequently smaller than anticipated. Automating those operations can often deliver more cost savings than outsourcing them.

Advanced IVR applications enable utilities to provide low-cost personalized self-service over the phone, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Technologies such as speech recognition and personalization serve to offer a more natural, effective, and less frustrating interaction than traditional touch-tone systems. Many customers prefer to complete account management tasks, pay bills, and place service orders via an automated system rather than wait for a live representative. If the application is unable to handle the customer interaction automatically, it can route the customer to the representative best able to meet their needs, based on language, reason for the call, and other criteria. When automated applications are set up to handle bill payment, requests for account balances, and other routine tasks in multiple languages, customer service personnel have more time to spend on more involved customer needs and revenue opportunities.

**MORE USES FOR INBOUND IVR APPLICATIONS**

**Auto-attendants.** IVR applications can serve as voice-driven auto-attendants that answer a utility company’s main office number and connect the caller with the person or department they want to reach.

**Field support.** Field technicians can call into automated IVR, text, mobile web and native mobile apps systems to report on their work progress or provide service updates.

**System-wide messages.** During an outage, utilities can rapidly set up a system-wide message to callers, letting them know that the outage is being addressed and providing an estimated repair completion time.

“It is imperative that we offer high-quality and efficient customer service by phone.

For many of our customers, the phone is the main way to contact us. Our Voxeo-powered solution minimizes call waiting times and enables our customer service agents to deal with more complex inquiries.”

*Service Development Manager, Northern Ireland Electricity*
MEET THE GROWING DEMAND FOR MULTI-CHANNEL COMMUNICATIONS

Consumer communication preferences are shifting, and companies that rely solely on voice phone calls for customer contact are not addressing growing customer demand for other communications channels, including text, mobile web, iPhone and Android apps, and a host of others. Many of these alternate channels can be inexpensive to set up, but the key is using a solution that does not require the application logic, back-end integrations and security to be redeveloped and maintained for each new channel.

Going forward, utilities must take advantage of low-cost service channels with a multi-channel platform and a design once, deploy anywhere solution. With the right solution, a utility company can reuse their investments in phone self-service applications to also engage customers via text, mobile web, live chat, native smartphone apps, and social networks with minimal effort. Because all these applications are based on the same infrastructure, the cost of development, integration, and analytics tools and reporting is kept to a minimum, while meeting the needs of today’s more mobile, more connected consumers.

GET PROACTIVE WITH OUTBOUND NOTIFICATIONS

Notifications that alert customers to service outages and bill delinquencies are essential to maintaining customer good will and minimizing costly service shut-offs.

During emergencies or before planned maintenance, utilities that can automatically deliver time-critical information via outbound calls or texts to customers and employees demonstrate a level of competence and customer engagement that builds loyalty and reduces customer concerns as well as inbound customer inquiries.

To help customers avoid service disconnects, leading utilities are using advanced IVR and two-way text solutions to contact customers both before and after their bills are due. More than just reminders, these calls and texts enable customers to pay their bill immediately, inform the utility of a payment they will make, or request a transfer to an agent. This technology not only reduces the past due accounts receivable overhead, it also minimizes unnecessary service disconnects with almost zero incremental cost.

Voxeo has allowed us to utilize the phone system we already had on our premises to communicate with our customers in an efficient and effective manner. We have reduced our support calls while keeping our customers more informed which is a win/win situation.

Service Development Manager,
Medium Enterprise Energy & Utilities Company
MORE USES FOR OUTBOUND NOTIFICATIONS

**Customer surveys.** Utilities with a focus on customer service and support excellence can automatically survey customers by phone using IVR or text following interactions with support personnel, after a new service has been established, or after repairs have been completed.

**Field workforce communications.** Utilities can leverage IVR and text solutions to send automated dispatch calls to workers in the field, streamline scheduling, and improve access to assets that speed maintenance and repair.

**Information updates.** Aside from service outages, outbound notifications can be used to provide customers with targeted updates on water restrictions, rate changes, new money-saving programs, and other important information.

MAINTAIN DESIGN, DEVELOPMENT, AND DEPLOYMENT FLEXIBILITY

For CTOs and the IT teams they direct, the focus is on implementing systems that enable better customer service within a tight budget. Reusing business logic and integrating with existing customer information systems (CIS) and other systems is a good start, but more savings can be realized by adopting solutions that make it easy to develop multi-channel applications on an open, standards-based platform. Such a platform not only avoids vendor lock-in, it ensures that the applications developed are easy to maintain and can be adapted quickly in-house to modify call flows and respond to changing business needs.

Many utility IT departments are already using cloud hosting to minimize capital outlays, reduce risk, and ensure scalability. Others need on-premise deployments that can be managed locally. A solution that enables the company to switch from one option to the other provides deployment flexibility. Further, a solution that can combine on-premise and cloud-based deployment offers support for low-cost failover and handling sudden spikes in traffic.

USE ANALYTICS TO IMPROVE SELF-SERVICE

Being able to make changes is important, but knowing what changes will have the biggest positive impact on customer experiences requires deep analytics that integrate with existing business intelligence and CRM systems to pinpoint issues and identify opportunities to enhance service. Integrated reporting and cross-channel analytics offer valuable insight.
into customers’ use of self-service applications. By measuring and analyzing voice recognition rates, application performance, task completion rates, and other call details, utilities can continually improve their systems, leading to increased self-service containment rates and a corresponding drop in agent costs.

VOXEO FOR UTILITIES

Voxeo helps utilities worldwide use automation to improve the customer experience while lowering costs with 24x7 personalized self-service over the phone, as well as via text, mobile web, and other communication channels. By enabling cross-channel reuse of application logic, Voxeo eliminates the duplicated effort and expense associated with supporting additional communication channels. Voxeo combines inbound customer self-service and proactive outbound notification capabilities into a single offering, enabling utilities to increase on-time payments, reduce delinquency shut-offs by up to 70 percent, streamline transactions, educate customers, and reliably deliver time-sensitive phone and text notifications. Proven to handle thousands of phone and text notifications in minutes, Voxeo solutions enabled one Voxeo customer to send 1.3 million outbound calls in 90 minutes. Voxeo’s advanced technology and best practices eliminate dead air and increase the successful delivery of service outage information and other notifications.

In addition to premises software, Voxeo offers cloud hosting for fast ramp up, without the expense of hardware or telephone lines. Many customers take advantage of both hosting and premises options for highly cost-effective bursting and failover.

Voxeo makes it easier for utilities to personalize customer interactions, deliver multi-lingual self-service, analyze application performance, and quickly make changes when needed. Voxeo customers have realized savings of up to 80% in ongoing application maintenance as well as improved loyalty, process efficiencies, and other operational cost savings.

To learn more, email solutions@voxeo.com or call us at 407-418-1800.

Visit us or join our conversations on the web at www.voxeo.com, blogs.voxeo.com, or twitter.com/voxeo