

Improving Inbound and Proactive Customer Service for Utilities

A strategic self-service imperative

In the utilities industry, several factors are making customer service a strategic priority. Competition with other providers, new technologies, rising customer expectations, the proliferation of mobile communications channels, and the need to support more sophisticated customer interactions are driving the need to deliver a better customer experience. Customers have more alternatives than ever before, and are willing to switch providers if they are dissatisfied with customer service – presenting challenges for customer retention.

Utility companies have the opportunity to implement process improvements and technologies that simultaneously enhance customer service by delivering more personalized experiences, and lower costs by offering proactive and self-service solutions. For example, systems that streamline payments, reminders, and collections serve to reduce contact center calls, minimize shut-offs, and directly improve the customer experience. Self-service systems that enable customers to get information and perform transactions 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 voice or text message provide the type of proactive 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 omni-channel self-service solutions from Aspect.

These strategies include ways to:

- Improve inbound self-service customer interactions
- Meet the growing demand for omni-channel and mobile communications
- Become more proactive with interactive outbound notifications
- Maintain design, development, and deployment flexibility
- Use surveys and 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 and have more data in their hands from Internet-of-Things (IoT) enabled devices, 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.

Delivering improvements in customer service is often considered an expensive proposition. However, with Bain and Company estimating the cost of acquiring a new customer is seven times higher than retaining an existing customer, the investment is worthwhile. New technologies like cloud deployments that require no up front capital expenditures and are flexible to provide additional capacity for spikes of outbound notifications provides significant long-term cost savings. Additionally, with 82% of customers citing a preference for self-service versus agent assistance when addressing issues, investments in self-service will improve customer satisfaction while reducing contact center costs.

Development and maintenance of self-service solutions provides additional opportunities for efficiency by streamlining efforts with an architecture that enables reuse of core automation components across multiple self-service channels. And, 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 outsourced call center operations to cut costs find that the savings are frequently smaller than anticipated. Automating those operations can often deliver more cost savings and a better customer experience. 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 intelligently 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. With a friendly business user interface, the ability to quickly update these messages can be given to non-technical users, improving the ability to deliver timely information.

Meet the Growing Demand for Omni-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 SMS, mobile web, iPhone and Android apps, and 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 lower-cost service channels with an omni-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. And, even when a customer interaction starts on one channel and progresses to others for convenience – for example, a customer might start an address change via IVR then transition to a channel like a disposable, one-time-use mobile web application with a link delivered via SMS – the right solution continues these interactions with seamless continuity.

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

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 while simultaneously deflecting inbound customer inquiries.

Outbound notifications are no longer only a one-way street – they present an opportunity for a two-way self-service interaction. Notifications that alert customers to service outages and bill delinquencies are essential to maintaining customer good will and minimizing costly service shut-offs.

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 via a link to a disposable Web application, 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.

More Uses for Outbound Notifications



Customer surveys. Ensuring satisfaction with service is critical to customer retention. Automatically survey customers using IVR, text or even Twitter, to measure satisfaction with interactions with support personnel, service connections, or repairs.



Field workforce communications. 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 efficiency rebates, 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 mobile-friendly, omni-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.

The Aspect Advantage

- Provide automated 24x7 access to commonly requested information
- Meet customer demand for mobile-friendly, self-service communication channels
- Increase customer satisfaction
- Personalize customer interactions
- Send proactive and actionable reminders and notifications
- Increase self-service resolution rates
- Identify application performance issues
- Easily make application changes and updates
- Meet and exceed SLAs
- Lower Total Cost of Ownership
- Capture and analyze customer data

Aspect for Utilities

Aspect 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 with our Aspect CXP platform, which easily integrates with Aspect or third party contact center solutions. By enabling cross-channel reuse of application logic, CXP eliminates the duplicated effort and expense associated with supporting additional communication channels. CXP 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. To meet the needs of mobile customers, the Aspect Mobility Suite offers enhancements like Aspect Proactive Mobile, which turns outbound outreach into interactive dialogues supplemented by disposable Web applications, Aspect Text Self-Service for interactive text response (ITR) interactions and much more.

Proven to handle thousands of phone and text notifications in minutes, our solutions enabled one customer to send 1.3 million outbound calls in 90 minutes. Aspect's advanced technology and best practices eliminate dead air and increase the successful delivery of service outage information and other notifications.

In addition to on-premises software, Aspect offers secure 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.

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

Corporate Headquarters East

300 Apollo Drive
Chelmsford, MA 01824
+(1) 978 250 7900 office
+(1) 978 244 7410 fax

Corporate Headquarters West

2325 E. Camelback Road,
Suite 700
Phoenix, AZ 85016
+(1) 602 282 1500 office
+(1) 602 956 2294 fax

Europe & Africa Headquarters

2 The Square, Stockley Park
Uxbridge
Middlesex UB11 1AD
+(44) 20 8589 1000 office
+(44) 20 8589 1001 fax

Asia Pacific & Middle East Headquarters

8 Cross Street
25-01/02 PWC Building
Singapore 048424
+(65) 6590 0388 office
+(65) 6324 1003 fax

About Aspect

Aspect's fully-integrated solution unifies the three most important facets of modern customer engagement strategy: customer interaction management, workforce optimization, and back-office. Through a full suite of cloud, hosted and hybrid deployment options, we help the world's most demanding contact centers and back offices seamlessly align their people, processes and touch points to deliver remarkable customer experiences. For more information, visit www.aspect.com.

