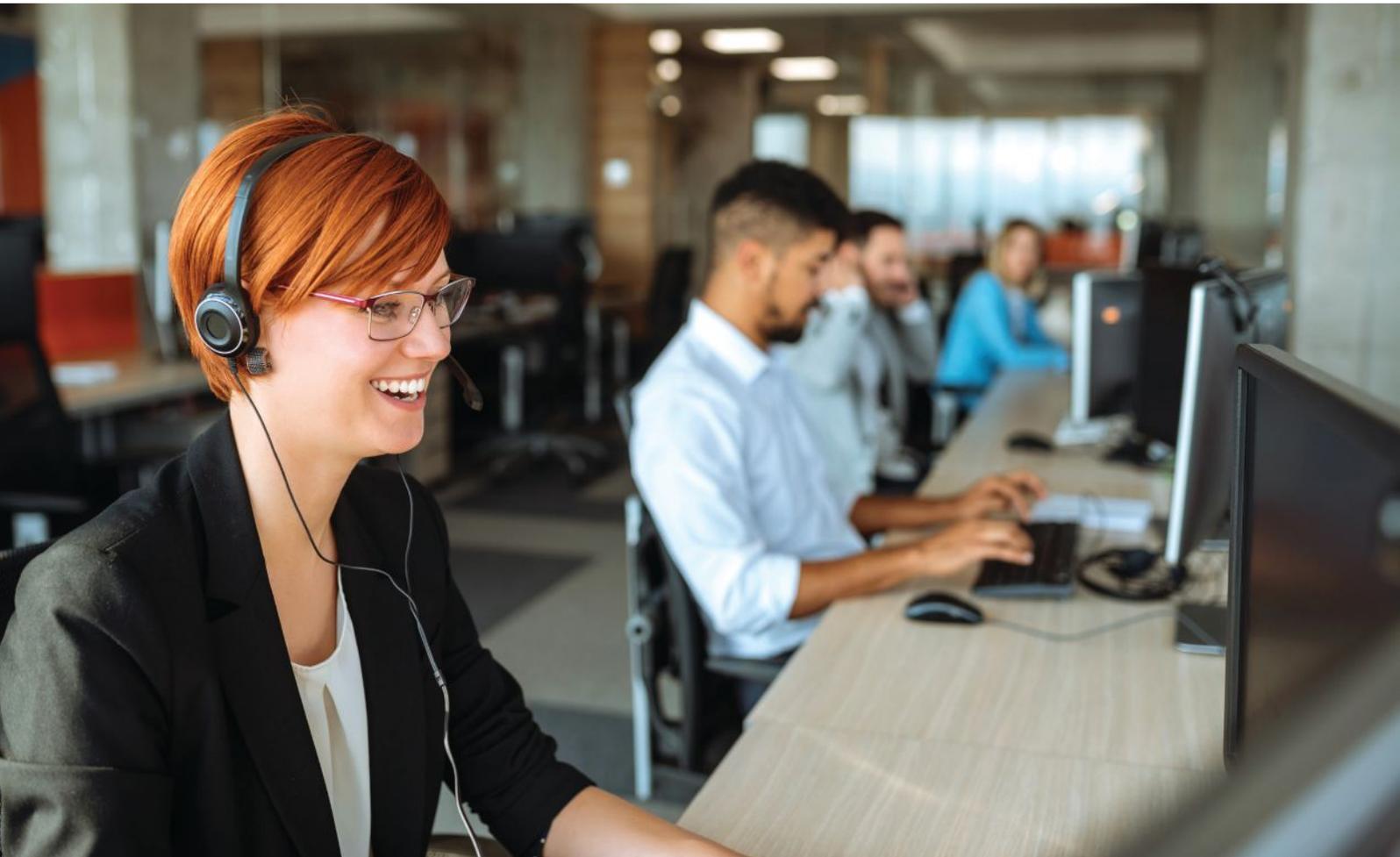


Top 10 Customer Service Tips

There's one basic fact of customer service. You may not always see day-to-day victories of good customer service at your utility, but when something goes wrong, you are going to hear about it — and in today's world, it will probably go viral on social media as well. Even if it doesn't go that badly, a negative customer service experience has an impact on your operations.



“Failure to meet customer expectations (results in) unnecessary escalations, decreased first call resolution and poor customer satisfaction surveys,” said James Barnes, the city of Tallahassee’s chief customer officer. “Standard practices allow for our customer operations staff to best handle customer inquiries. Without standard practices, there is inconsistency in how we serve our customers. Our goal is to provide quality first, every contact, every call, every time. The city of Tallahassee’s motto is ‘Customer is our Business!’”

Less than ideal customer service can also impact a utility’s productivity and employee morale and — as pointed out above — create a viral social media sensation that you don’t want your utility associated with. With that in mind, FMEA’s *Relay* decided to devote this issue to looking at customer service. To start off, we turned to Hometown Connections and its list of ideas for great customer service, and built upon it with information found around the public power community.

1. Use Technology to Stay in Touch With Customers

This means having social media that can provide information to consumers, which can be especially important in an emergency situation. According to J.D. Power,

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more utility customers (66 percent versus 59 percent in 2016) are getting critical information during a power outage, such as the cause of the outage, the number of customers affected and estimates on when power will be restored. If the anecdotal trends we’ve seen in Florida after the recent hurricanes and weather events are anything to go by, much of that increased communication is coming through social media. The result? Overall satisfaction among customers who receive outage information is much higher than among those who do not receive such information (716 versus 683, respectively), according to J.D. Power.

2. Make Your Website Easy for Customers to Use

“As technology has changed, our customer expectations have changed. The new generation wants to conduct business via apps on their smartphones. We have incorporated several different

options over the last few years,” Barnes said, before outlining the many changes they’ve made in this vein. “1. Revamping our website (talgov.com). 2. Allowing customers to pay their bill via a smart bill sent to their email. 3. The e+ mobile app allows customers to pay, report an outage and check usage from their smartphone. 4. The e+ kiosks allow customers to pay at various locations around the city. 5. DigiTally is a one-stop shop allowing customers to report any city issues, such as potholes, tree problems, pay their utility bills, find my bus, adopt a pet and find a park, plus a plethora of additional things.”

The need for a mobile website platform cannot be emphasized enough. According to J.D. Power’s 2017 survey of utilities, more than one-third (35 percent) of customers are now accessing their utility’s website either by a mobile phone or by a tablet, which is a 15 percent increase from 2016. That number is only expected to continue to increase.

7 Takeaways for Excellence in Customer Service



1. Foster a culture of service, starting at the top.
2. Do business the way customers want — not the way you may want.
3. Listen to your customers.
4. Walk in the customer’s shoes — and remove the pain points.
5. Hire customer service representatives for attitude, train for excellence and flex their schedules for efficiency.
6. Offer services that respect the customer’s time and preferences.
7. Measure what matters and monitor that issues are resolved.

Source: American Public Power Association

3. Don't Forget the Phone

As Hometown Connections' Senior Vice President of Planning and Marketing Steve VanderMeer pointed out, integrated voice response can be critical during an outage.

"Even simple auto-attendants are better than a busy signal or no answer at all," VanderMeer said, before recommending that utilities keep their phone operating procedures simple and ensure that the number of published phone numbers is kept to a minimum.

4. Include Newsletters or Educational Energy Efficiency Bill Stuffers in Customers' Monthly Invoices

These communication outreach tools can be used to promote programs, efficiency tips, events, hours and any other information that will help your customers. Some-

thing to keep in mind with that, however, is that customers' habits are changing. Paperless communications are on the rise, according to J.D. Power.

"Less than half (43 percent) of customers recall communications from their utility; however, the source of communications is changing across the industry," its utility study states. "Year over year, paper bill insert recall has decreased to 33 percent from 36 percent, while there has been an increase in the number of customers going directly to the utility website (15 percent versus 12 percent in 2016) and those who receive emails from their utility (25 percent versus 21 percent in 2016)."

5. Office Flex Lobby Hours

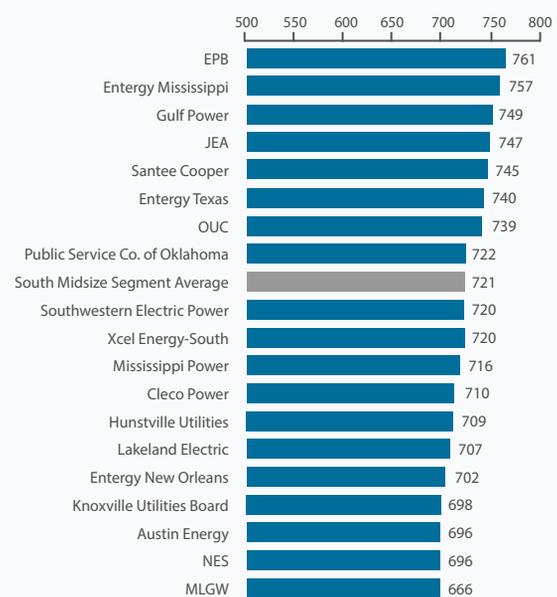
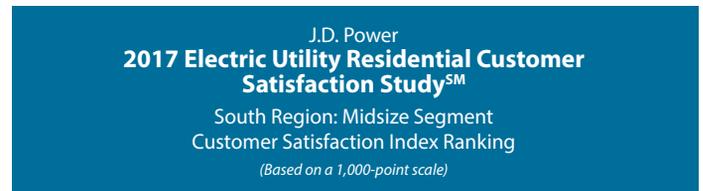
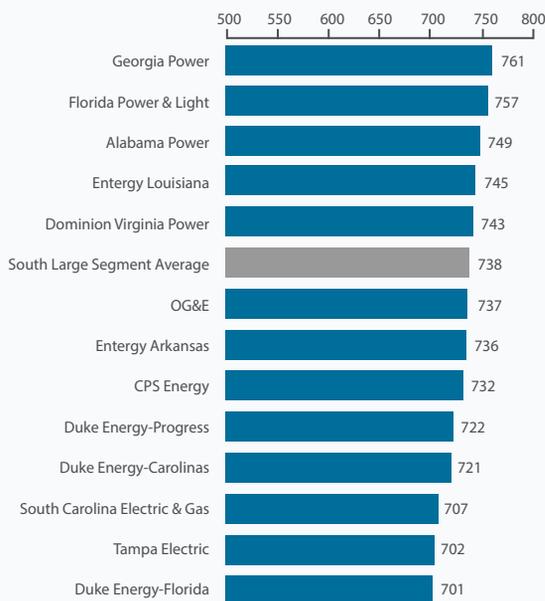
VanderMeer recommends that utilities create time outside of the usual 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. timeframe for customers to be able

to pay their bills or have questions answered. It's a growing trend, he reported, with more public power utilities offering night as well as Saturday hours to meet their customers' needs.

6. Offer Online Billing and Payment – and Don't Charge Extra for It

Electronic bill-pay is increasing, according to J.D. Power's 2017 study, with utilities using messaging to encourage customers to move away from paying their bill with a check by mail, helping to reduce mail payments by three percentage points year over year (17 percent versus 20 percent, respectively). However, according to VanderMeer, 80 percent of public power customers pay via mail or in person.

The city of Tallahassee utility allows customers to pay their bill via a smart bill sent to their email.



Source: J.D. Power 2017 Electric Utility Residential Customer Satisfaction StudySM

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"We have the highest rate of usage among any utility across the United States, capturing on average 40 percent of email addresses," Barnes said.

7. Make Utility Bills Easy to Read and Understand

VanderMeer recommends bills show usage history for the past 13 months (in a graph, if possible). That can help customers be more informed as well as help them prepare financially for higher usage months to avoid bill shock.

8. Offer the Least-Cost Form of Payment, Such as a Bank Draft

There are many ways you can encourage customers to change their form of payment. Those include asking during live interactions with customers, messaging on bills, using a statement stuffer highlighting the benefits to the customer of switching, email campaigns to customers showing the ease of making the switch, website messaging and tutorials explaining how to make the switch, monetary incentives for customers who enroll and partnering with community outreach groups to help spread the message.

9. Invest in Your Customer Service Representatives and Track Customer Service Trends

That means recruiting and training the right people — or, as the adage goes, hire for personality and then train for expertise. Some utilities offer tuition reimbursement for customer service representatives.

Another option to show your support is to encourage your team to investigate the American Public Power Association's Customer Service Management Certificate Program® to see if it's right for them.

Customer service trends for utilities include digital optimization, increased social media outreach, live outage maps, mobile-friendly websites and apps that can help educate customers while allowing them to pay their bills and conduct other business.



"Create and/or review all customer journeys. Then build a plan to have them fully available in digital channels within one year. Adopting an end-to-end approach to digitization of customer journeys — across channels and business functions — will support an omnichannel customer experience," according to Accenture Consulting's "New Energy Consumer: New Paths to Operating Agility." "Put the customer at the heart of all operations. Exceed customer expectations by delivering seamless and relevant consumer experiences across all touchpoints — all day, every day. A critical prerequisite is the ability to work horizontally across silos, including sales, marketing and service."

They recommend that utilities set up a customer engagement control tower to continuously improve customer experience and operational effectiveness in day-to-day operations. Utilities should incorporate the customer's perspective on marketing and sales as well as customer service. And because you can't track what you don't measure, analytics tools should be used to capture and analyze consumers' behaviors and preferences throughout their interactions with the utility.

10. Know Your Top 10 Customers and Make Sure They Know You

That doesn't mean you need a formal key accounts program, VanderMeer said, but you do need to know who those accounts are so you can best meet their needs and keep the lines of communication open and flowing.

It all comes down to communication and engagement, no matter the size of the customer, to create and implement customer service best practices at your utility.

"Creating awareness and motivating customers to engage with their utilities in energy programs, products and services can represent an ambitious undertaking as it is often difficult to develop and implement strategies that encourage customers to recognize the need for these additional offerings," according to J.D. Power. "It is imperative that utilities understand their customers' experiences and preferences, as well as their levels of awareness, familiarity and usage of the utility's offerings, in order to develop an effective approach designed to drive behavioral changes and increase overall customer satisfaction." ■