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Rethinking customer service in 4 easy steps

A guide for
the utilities sector

Introduction

Contact centres in the utilities sector operate in some of the most challenging circumstances. Call volumes can change rapidly due to forces outside of industry control like world events, supply chain issues and the weather. This can lead to anything from a simple request for information to high-stakes concerns over **fuel poverty** for vulnerable customers or emergency assistance for the elderly during winter months. How can companies provide the best customer experiences in the face of such variability?

The Jan 2021-Jan 2022 **UK Customer Satisfaction Index (UKCSI)** showed that the industry as a whole is improving and adapting:

74.5%

CSAT is higher than last year

50%

of utilities organisations have improved CSAT by 2% or more

However, out of 13 industry categories the utility sector was second to last. Furthermore, a snapshot taken in some of the most challenging circumstances in **Q1 of 2022, Ofgem** recorded the lowest ever levels of service satisfaction for domestic energy customers, 66%.

Rather than hoping for the best, utility companies can prepare for whatever the future holds by implementing scalable, efficient solutions that promote positive customer-facing experiences. Loyalty may not be a key motivator, especially in a restrictive market, but brand reputation, swift resolution and improved working conditions for agents should be. This guide will explore 4 steps to help reimagine the customer experience and boost contact centre resilience.

Step 1: Prepare

Utilities companies know there will always be uncontrollable events which trigger contact spikes. That's why preparing demand-management strategies is crucial to maintaining control and mitigating any negative effects. Often the ability to swiftly mobilise staff is the crux of any effective response, although it should be noted that simply adding more agents doesn't necessarily improve customer service. Calls are time-consuming and costly, with the **highest cost per inbound interaction** across the different channels.

Contact Centre as a Service (CCaaS) solutions are cloud-based so not only is it possible to dramatically upscale operations by optimising **workforce management** but they are also equipped with a range of features that maximise flexibility:

- Agent management tools for employee profiles, work rules, skill profiles, work preferences, legal constraints and shift swapping.
- Planning management tools, including multichannel planning, scenario simulations and mobile apps for agents.
- **Analytics tools** to provide rapid insights into agent activity and multichannel adherence, projections, KPIs and more.
- **Automation** can provide digital deflection even when customers reach for the phone.
- Updated topical messaging can be used **across all channels** to target specific FAQs.

Step 2: Predict

It's not all floods and foul weather though. **Ofgem's Consumer Perceptions of the Energy Market Q2 2021** report shines a light on the predictable factors influencing customer contact in utilities:

30% of consumers contacted their supplier in the past 3 months.

Of these:
25% to give a meter reading
21% to raise a query about a bill
17% to ask a question about a meter

Predicting customer engagement can be a powerful tool to mitigate potential spikes in contact volume. Providers need to look at not just the when and why but also how customers contact them. This makes it possible to create intelligent outbound strategies, over the right channels, to solve customer queries before they need to ask.

CCaaS solutions have some key features that can help both predict and anticipate demand as well as deliver proactive services:

- **Forecast management** offers in-depth views of multichannel traffic history, forecasting by activity or skill and weekly volume assessments.
- **Analytics based alerts** can be an early warning system helping supervisors predict and react to increasing call volumes.
- **Integration of unified communications tools** keeps teams connected and visibility high on developing situations. Insights on new trending customer queries can be shared and even go on to inform pre-emptive changes to deliver specific standardised messaging.
- **360-degree customer view** helps anticipate a customer's next step with information from voice and digital interactions.
- **Omnichannel** and **outbound call** capabilities allow customers to receive proactive services on the most suitable channel for their needs.

Step 3: Prioritise

When call volume is high, there is a clear need to prioritise those calls which need immediate attention. Customers may not like longer wait times but the majority understand that emergencies and **vulnerable customers** should be prioritised. This approach is in line with Ofgem's public messaging about the **priority services register**.

This approach is made easier with the AI-enhanced capabilities of a CCaaS solution:

- **Identification**
  Natural Language Understanding (NLU) can help identify keywords and phrases that may signal a customer is in need of additional help.
- **Qualification**
  Setting up **qualification** and **IVR** options to be intuitive for customers to use so emergency or priority queries are recognised and fast-tracked to agents.
- **Routing**
  With one of the **best routing engines** on the market, utility companies can use multiple distribution rules to make the most of specialised teams and automated services.
- **Priority status**
  Assigning priority status can fast-track queries, enhance routing and enable specific functions only available to these select customers, for example callbacks.
- **Deflection**
  Easily accessible **self-service options**, including via IVR menus can help deliver convenience to customers with low-complexity issues even when they instinctively reach for the phone.

Step 4: Provide

What do customers really want? As Stephen Yap, Research Director at the **CCMA** put it, **"people want their questions and their queries resolved quickly and painlessly"**. By anticipating demand and providing customers with accurate up-to-date information, utility companies can bypass the need for customers to make contact; **a recent article suggests** that this is even more effective than digital deflection.

The key is to do it in a consistent way across channels. This way if customers feel the need to double-check, they will find the same information. Any agent they speak to has a record of the information exchanged, which makes for effective knowledge management.

The **reception for this type of proactive contact** is positive. Below are the percentage of customers who found the information they received from their utility supplier met their needs very or fairly well:

- **80%** notification of a price increase
- **82%** information about getting a smart meter
- **91%** what to do in an emergency
- **85%** what to do when needing assistance paying bills
- All 11 query types scored **80%** or higher

While providing information is easy, engagement is more difficult. This is why channel choice is important. In a 3 month period, **Ofgem reported** that the channel preference for the 30% of customers who contacted their suppliers was as follows:

54%
Phone

13%
Live webchat

22%
Email

11%
Through an app

14%
Website form

5%
Social media

Consistent messaging on these channels is crucial to build customer trust. **Evidence also suggests** that digitally excluded customers may need targeted support to make sure they also receive important information.

It all adds up to customer experience success

Utility providers have been trying hard to cope with multiple pressures but hard work and perseverance are not always enough, 2021 and 2022 saw **multiple suppliers going bust**. In the face of successive challenges adaptability and flexibility become a necessity and can create opportunities. Even customers appointed a **Supplier of Last Resort (SoLR)** can become bonded to providers who maintain consistent service standards.

With an optimistic eye on the future, those companies who win over customers in bad times will win more through brand reputation in better times to come. The strategies outlined in this guide can then be used to help make the most of new opportunities too, allowing utility providers to easily scale up their services.

The flexibility and intelligence of CCaaS platforms provide an unmissable opportunity for utility providers to truly optimise customer service. These 4 steps: prepare, predict, prioritise and provide help harness the best of technology to provide consistent high-quality customer experiences.

Are you interested in learning more? Arrange a demo

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About Odigo

Odigo provides Contact Centre as a Service (CCaaS) solutions that facilitate communication between large organisations and individuals using a global omnichannel management platform. With its innovative approach based on empathy and technology, Odigo enables brands to connect through the crucial human element of interaction, while also taking full advantage of the potential of digital. A pioneer in the customer experience (CX) market, the company caters to the needs of more than 250 large enterprise clients in over 100 countries.

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Customer experience inspired by empathy, driven by technology