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Company profile

PacifiCorp, a regulated utility based in Portland, Ore., serves 1.7 million customers across 136,000 square miles in six western states. The company has three business units: Pacific Power, which serves customers in Oregon, Washington and California; Rocky Mountain Power, which serves customers in Utah, Wyoming and Idaho; and PacifiCorp Energy, which operates a broad portfolio of power-generating assets.

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PacifiCorp ramps up proactive outage communications

PacifiCorp remodeled its approach to outage communications over the past two years based on feedback from customers who indicated they wanted more proactive contact. The Portland, Ore.-based utility deployed a voluntary automated callback program in 2008, along with other initiatives to provide critical information within minutes to thousands of customers when their power goes out. Participation in the program stands at about 43%.

More recently, the utility began offering expanded information through recorded messages that are specific to each situation; advance notice of emergency outages and repairs; and updates via social media services such as Twitter. Future plans call for more proactive contact, including expansion of outage information provided on the utility's Web site.

"The big driver for us is to continue asking customers, 'What more can we do for you?' The customers always come back to us with something more," says Eric Lehman, manager of customer service. "As we get better, their expectations of the company increase. The expectations in all arenas for service and information are changing so quickly right now. The new customer perception is that they should always be able to get the information they want from their vendors and they should be able to get it the way they want it, whether that is through a phone call, email or Web site."

Responding to customers' expectations

Over the years leading up to 2008, PacifiCorp developed more robust phone and interactive voice response (IVR) systems to handle the high volume of calls that occurs during large outages. Specifically, the utility:

- Improved the flow of information from its outage management systems to customer service agents and IVRs;
- Provided better peak volume/overflow call handling capabilities; and
- Maintained consistency of message during outages.

In survey after survey, however, customers indicated the changes weren't enough. "Even with our improved tools our customers told us that we could do better. They wanted more information, more quickly, during outages," Lehman explains.

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For example, if an estimated time of restoration (ETOR) changed during an outage, the utility did not communicate that information proactively. Customers had to call and ask for an update.

“I think we were a little bit naïve in our approach, in that we thought that the customers would be satisfied as long as we were always available to them. We spent time making sure customers could always get through to us when they called, that they could always reach us and get the information they wanted,” Lehman says.

Lehman and his project team began a series of initiatives to further improve the delivery of information to customers during power interruptions. The outage callback program was the first step and became a centerpiece of the new plan. Another element involved an increase in the amount of information that flowed from the outage management system to customer service agents and the IVRs.

Outage callback touches five systems

Following more than a year of development, the outage callback program went live in March 2008. The program was developed with Columbus, Ohio-based Twenty First Century Communications (TFCC), PacifiCorp's vendor for overflow outage calls. “Internally it took quite a lot of programming ... because conservatively that program touches five different systems within our call center. There was a lot of work done to ensure everything was synchronized and the information was flowing properly,” notes Lehman.

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PacifiCorp's automated callback program: A closer look

- The automated callback is an optional service offered to all customers who report a power outage;
- The option for receiving callbacks is available no matter how a customer reports the outage, whether by calling a representative or utilizing the automated systems.
- The customer is able to specify the best phone number to use for the callback, whether home, cell, work or other number.
- If the customer accepts, the utility calls when the ETR changes and when the power has been restored.
- If the power is still out at a customer's residence, the customer is given a prompt that allows the customer to inform the utility that the power is not restored at that location. This results in the automatic issuance of a new outage report which is transmitted to the outage management system.

Consistency of message – regardless of the delivery method – is an important piece of the callback program. “If we were going to have an automated phone call going out notifying customers that their ETR had been changed to 2 p.m., the agent sitting at the desk and the IVR both have to have that same information. So we increased the amount of information that was coming from the outage management system at both the agent desktops and out through this callback program to the customers. We didn't have the crew status available before. That is now entered into the outage management system and it flows through to the IVRs and agent desktops.”

In addition to crew status, the project included additional information about the outage. Customers now receive the status and number of customers affected by the outage. A message might say, for example, “We're aware of your outage; crews have been dispatched. Approximately 500 customers in your area are affected.”

On the customer's end, the callback program is an option that becomes available whether they call in to a customer service representative or use the internal or external IVR. "No matter how they report their outage they're given the option to sign up for this callback program when they contact us," says Lehman.

In choosing whether to send automatic or optional callbacks, program leaders chose the latter. "We went with the opt-in because customer focus groups told us ... they wanted to decide whether or not to have us call them. We were thinking we would just call everybody ... but they look at it in some ways as a telemarketing call. They don't want us to call them unless they say it's OK," Lehman explains.

Customers who opt in receive a callback as soon as there is a change in ETOR, he says. "As soon as that is entered into the outage management system it triggers the phone calls going out. It happens conservatively within 10 minutes of when the new information is known. It's usually faster than that ... so it's almost as real time as you can get."

Lehman says another feature of the callback program is the ability for customers to leave any number they wish for callbacks. Those using the IVR can key in the contact number.

New callback projects deployed

PacifiCorp continued to deploy proactive callbacks in 2009 for various reasons, including emergency line repairs. Last winter, the utility started placing calls during rare critical peak-use periods. In one instance, more than 100,000 calls were made to Utah customers during an extreme cold spell that threatened the PacifiCorp system as well as the Northwest grid. Using automated calling through TFCC, the message is unique for each situation and is sent to customers without asking for their permission. "We called for voluntary curtailment or energy reduction about four times in the past year in different areas," notes Lehman. "Our field operations group sees value in placing the calls. We feel there have been benefits to the company as far as avoiding some potentially large-scale unplanned outages from the system being overwhelmed. In return there are benefits to the customers – they aren't seeing their power go off."

In its goal of responding to customer expectations, PacifiCorp uses Twitter and other social media for various purposes, including outage communications. "Twitter has been another good learning experience for us," Lehman says. "The thing I've been most surprised about with Twitter is how quickly a message can reach beyond our immediate followers ... to get forwarded on from our followers to other groups. The reach is far more extensive than it appears from the number of followers."

PacifiCorp has a separate Twitter account for each of the six states it serves. These accounts are used most often by corporate communications to send out information on energy efficiency, company news, events and other purposes. The call center began using Twitter in July 2009, mostly for outage communications. "We are sending tweets on large regional events or if there is something unique about an outage situation that we want to communicate broadly," Lehman adds. For example, Twitter was used during recent wildfires that required the utility to shut down small sections of its electric system.

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There are times when we recognize that we need to be better at getting information to customers without them asking for it first.

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For the future, Lehman plans a Web site redesign project that will incorporate features such as outage maps and expanding the utility's use of YouTube. "I would like to see our Web site become more of a one-stop information outlet for our customers, in addition to providing features such as outage maps. I would like to see links to outage restoration videos, for example," he explains. "In the next step, I envision centralizing all these different communication methods to some degree on the company Web site."

Lehman says PacifiCorp is committed to continuous improvement. "The idea that everybody is going to call in every time they want information from a utility is probably outdated. So we need to figure out new ways of transmitting information to the group of customers that want it from the Web site or via text message. We'll continually explore new pathways."

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