

Cherryland Electric Cooperative in Northern Michigan Sheds Light on Outage Status with Text Notifications

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Improving Member Loyalty while Maintaining Lean Operational Efficiency

When a survey showed a group of members felt they were in the dark about outage communications, Cherryland quickly took action to improve the situation.

At the time of the survey, Cherryland was using traditional methods to communicate with members, including Facebook, social media, the website, and SmartHub. “In the survey, we asked a question about *How well are you kept informed about outages?*,” said Courtney Doyle, Communications & Member Relations Manager at Cherryland Electric Cooperative. Although all the traditional methods of communication were being used, the survey revealed that a group of members still felt they were not being informed about outages.

“We survey our members every two years and after major events to get feedback,” Doyle continues. “Given the survey results, we had a lot of evidence that some members weren’t feeling completely informed. So we wanted to add a question to the survey and ‘How would you like to be informed?’ rose to the top,” says Doyle. She adds, “Our philosophy is to be transparent with our members, regardless of the type of news. Our members can handle bad news, but they shouldn’t have to handle no news.”

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People were asking for it. 65% of people said they would like to receive text communications.”

Courtney Doyle
Communications &
Member Relations Manager
Cherryland Electric Cooperative



With over 38,000 members in Northern Michigan and a service territory that includes rural membership as well as tech-focused early adopters, members surveyed indicated that texting was the preferred way to reach them for outage notifications.

"We operate on the Member Loyalty Index (MLI), which was co-created by Cherryland CEO, Rachel Johnson," says Doyle. Customer satisfaction is very important, yet it is an assessment that looks at past events for measurement. The MLI measures loyalty, which is forward-looking. According to MLI, "...most of the research agrees that a loyal consumer is much more valuable than a satisfied consumer. A loyal consumer can have one bad experience and still remain a committed advocate for your brand or service."

"We are lucky to have a lot of forward-thinking management," says Doyle. Using the Member Loyalty Index to obtain member feedback allows Cherryland to build stronger, long-term relations with its members and supports the service-oriented and community-focused cooperative values.

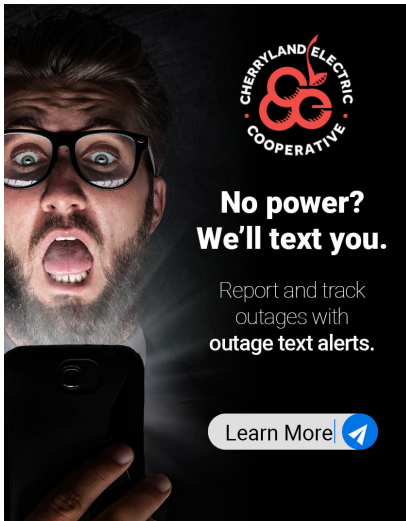
The integrated, automated aspect of TextPower fit Cherryland's requirements. "We are one of the leanest cooperatives in the country, so using our time wisely when communicating with members is important to us," comments Doyle. For instance, the ability to have proactive text communications going out during a storm frees the communications team to do other things such as collecting content in the field and relaying updates to the member services team.

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Another outage communication consideration is speed. During storms or other events, members want to know what's going on, and they want to know *now*. Sending automated text messages with status updates allows Cherryland Electric Cooperative to let members know that someone is aware of the situation and is actively working on it. Speedy communication allows members to feel like they are in the loop.

After selecting TextPower to provide the texting services, Cherryland teams, including Communications, IT, and Operations worked closely together to prepare for the roll-out and make sure the system worked as intended.

Implementing texting to communicate with members was a new process. It allowed the teams to review procedures and provided the opportunity to create more formalized communication plans, even for normal outages.

Cherryland worked closely with TextPower to create new functionality to communicate with select customer segments during potential rolling blackouts. "TextPower has been fantastic to work with. It's a really great working partnership," says Doyle.

The Communications Assurance Program from TextPower was used to enroll members in the texting service. TextPower determined which numbers from the CIS were mobile numbers. "A majority of the population is moving toward using only a cell phone, even when at home", says Mark Nielsen, TextPower Executive Chairman, and Cofounder. "Over 70% of U.S. households no longer have a landline phone," he adds.



To introduce TextPower to members, Cherryland implemented an outreach campaign that included a dedicated web page, ads that ran in the Cherryland magazine, and an email that introduced this cool new thing that was coming – you're going to get a text if you have a number on file with us – so that it wasn't a surprise. "We knew that members were looking for it. People were asking for it. 65% of people said we would like to be communicated with by Text," comments Doyle.

Cherryland implemented TextPower for outage communications in February 2020 and the first big test came in August 2021 during the next major storm. After using text messages to communicate during the storm, Cherryland sent the same survey again. The question 'How well are you kept informed about outages?', which had previously rated a 2.9 out of 5, rose to 4.1 out of 5 in the new survey. Texting had filled the communications gap.

"We all know the power of convenience," says Doyle. "We can now tell members if they're not at home, your power is out but we're working on it, don't worry about it, it should be back on by this time. When you proactively communicate with your members, they feel taken care of and that builds trust equity."



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Cherryland now sends text messages to let members know that they are aware of an outage in their area, when a crew is assigned, when a crew is on the way, and the estimated time of restoral (ETR). When power is restored, Cherryland sends a text such as “You should now have power. If you don’t, give us a call.” Members can also text “out” to Cherryland to let them know their power is out, or “status” to find the status of an outage.

Following the implementation of TextPower, Cherryland has seen call volume during outages significantly decrease.



During a storm, people are now calling to ask how they can get text messages about outage updates. Member services representatives can then get those members signed up for text communications.

The two-way texting capability has provided some unforeseen benefits. Members text a variety of responses and even include anecdotes such as *How do I cook my pizza if the oven is off?* But by and large, incoming texts are overwhelmingly positive with responses that include *Thank You, Thank you so much, Appreciate the update!* etc. Cherryland shares these texts with the rest of the team, including the Member Services Representatives, the Linemen, and others. “It’s great to know you’re being thanked, and we want our internal team to know that our members appreciate their work,” comments Doyle.

The Cherryland Communications team also monitors incoming text messages to look for patterns and opportunities to further enhance communications and engagement. Inclusion in the texting service is now part of a new member’s experience in the onboarding process. Cherryland lets new members know they have the option to opt out and that texting is part of the communications for outages. It’s a nice perk and they don’t have to ask for it.

Cherryland is looking at additional uses for texting where email and IVR are currently used, including scheduled maintenance, tree trimming, and payment reminders. Doyle comments, “The more we can automate an official communication the better, because why wouldn’t you?”

Working with TextPower was a positive experience for Cherryland. “When we ask if an idea is possible, the answer is never an outright no”, says Doyle. “The cool thing is that TextPower’s response is ‘That’s an interesting idea – let’s see what we can figure out.’”

To learn more about TextPower visit www.arcos-inc.com. To learn more about Cherryland Electric Cooperative visit cherrylandelectric.coop.

