For Gastonia, North Carolina, Outage Notifications Open More Possibilities for Texting

Peter Maloney, October 3, 2023

When they started using TextPower for outage notifications, utility managers for the City of Gastonia in North Carolina could not foresee the multiple ways in which the service would grow.

Gastonia signed on with TextPower about a year ago and went live with its outage notification system, SmartAlerts™, in May 2023. In preparation for the roll-out, Gastonia conducted test runs, sending enrollment texts to employees and small groups of customers. The City's utility managers were also careful to establish proper business practices when it came to texting customers.

"We didn't want to cross any line or even flirt with that line," Ray Kurtiak, applications manager for the City's Technology Services Department, said. "We wanted to be responsible stewards for our customers. TextPower was very helpful with that, with the policies and rules and staying abreast of all that."

> "Customers are texting more. In this day and age, especially among customers who have grown up with it, texting is the fastest way to get their attention."
>
> Glenn Fried
> GIS Analyst II
> The City of Gastonia, NC
> Public Utilities Department

"We are very protective of our customers," Glenn Fried, GIS Analyst II for the City of Gastonia's Public Utilities Department, said. The utility wanted to be very careful about how it would reach out to its customers and is also now very cautious about who has access to the utility's texting service, he said. TextPower explained all that really well, including the provisions of the Telephone Consumer Protection Act of 1991, which governs the use of automated telephone equipment for telemarketing, informational and emergency communications.

In the initial roll-out, Gastonia sent text messages to 81,000 customer phone numbers across three utility services – electric, water and sewer – to introduce the texting service.

Gastonia is a city of about 80,000 people near Charlotte, just above the South Carolina border. The City's Electric Division provides electric power within the city limits. The City is also a regional water and wastewater utility serving Gastonia and many surrounding communities.

The roll-out started with 5,000 numbers. Then, the City paused to see if there was any fallout and "to see if we were reaching customers the way they wanted us to," Fried said. After the pause, the roll-out continued, going to the City's electric customers on the first day and then to water and sewer customers on days two and three.

Many utilities that use TextPower start with the electric utility and only later follow with the roll-out to customers of other city services. Gastonia debated the timing of the roll-out internally for some time. "TextPower said we could do it all at once, and we were very confident it was going to work because of the preliminary testing we had been doing," Fried said. The City had also prepared its customers with a media campaign that also increased confidence in customer acceptance. "So, we did it over three days," in part, Fried said, because the city did not want to disturb customers by sending them texts in the middle of the night. So, the introductory texts ended at 4 p.m. each day.

"We did hit one snag," Fried recalled. "An upstream provider of our phone carrier was blocking our number in some cases." But the problem was pretty much resolved in one day. "TextPower jumped right on it, and got it solved. They made sure we didn't miss our targets." It was all done in one week," Fried said, including clean-up, such as correcting old or defunct phone numbers.

The response was "overwhelming, much better than we expected," Fried said. Of the 81,000 initial texts sent, only 6,000 customers, across all three services, opted out. Since then, however, even more customers have opted in.

Gastonia now has about 84,000 customers signed on to use the TextPower service, which the city has branded TRU+E Alerts.

"We are constantly seeing more people opt in," Fried said. "Each service is adding about 100 numbers per month or more." Much of the increase has come through the City's social media platform and advertising on its website.

Fried also credits the City's Communications Department which conducted campaigns over social media, Twitter, and the city's website both in advance and since the roll-out. Those campaigns were so successful they earned the City's Electric Division ElectriCities of North Carolina's 2022 Public Power Award of Excellence for innovation and investment to better serve customers and communities. The TRU+E Alert system was tested within a week or two of its roll-out. Gastonia is in "thunderstorm alley," and electric power outages can be frequent during the summer, Fried said.

A single severe storm can generate as many as 9,500 texts regarding electric outages. During such a storm, there will be an initial influx of customers reporting outages, which the City acknowledges, telling customers they are aware of the outage and, usually, in a short amount of time sending messages informing customers of the estimated time to restoration and updating customers, if necessary. In many cases, the outage is fixed and service is restored in 20 or 30 minutes, and the customer is informed their service has been restored.

> The City's Electric Division earned the ElectriCities of North Carolina's 2022 Public Power Award of Excellence for innovation and investment to better serve customers and communities for the campaigns over social media to promote TRU+E Alerts.

So far, the experience has shown customer usage of the city's website and outage management app is decreasing. Calls to the city's phone system to report outages is down, said Fried. "Customers are texting more," he said. "In this day and age, especially among customers who have grown up with it, texting is the fastest way to get their attention. Usually, they read a text within 20 seconds, while emails are usually not read immediately." Texting also fits well with the city's demographics, Fried said. "Our population is increasing and it is tech savvy."

Industry data shows that many people now routinely ignore phones calls, especially from unknown sources, but "less than 2 percent of text messages are spam, so customers are less likely to ignore them," Mark Nielsen, executive chairman and co-founder of TextPower, said. "On the other hand, 98 percent of text messages are opened and 95 percent are read within three minutes."
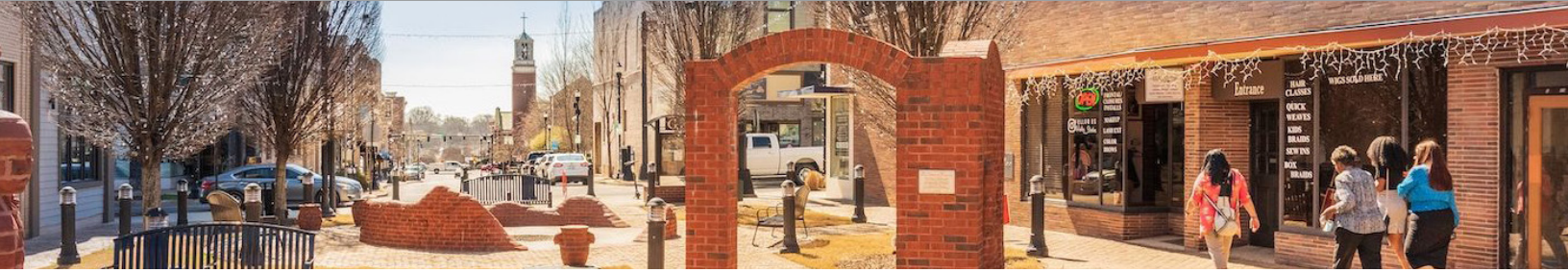
Other platforms, such as Facebook or IVR phone calls, would appear to offer customer contact similar to texting, but only about 48 percent of phone calls are answered, 20 percent of emails are opened or read, and 9 percent of Facebook messages elicit customer engagement, Nielsen said. Customer satisfaction and appreciation is also apparent, Fried said, in the number of texts the City receives thanking the utility in response to the outage and restoration notifications they receive. Judging from the inbound texts, customers think "it is the neatest thing since sliced bread," he said.

Many of the inbound texts are a function of standard features of the texting system, such as when a customer texts, "OUT," indicating that their power is out. But inbound texts can include a variety of messages. A customer can tell the City that they need to update their phone number or address. A customer could also communicate a non-standard response, such as informing the utility that they only have partial power. In such cases, the utility can respond by telling the customer to check their circuit breakers.

Such non-conforming texts represent a small percentage of all the texts the city receives, maybe one or two a day, Fried said, but it is "something we are monitoring." Right now, those texts are going to Fried, who channels them to the appropriate city department. Eventually, however, the plan is to handle them more systematically. Such non-conforming texts also represent an opportunity for improving or enhancing customer satisfaction. Recognizing the opportunity, TextPower has created a system that can forward any message that comes into the system to one or more email addresses.

For example, if a utility texts customers to tell them that the utility's office will be closed on an upcoming holiday and someone replies, "I've got an emergency - my power is out … who can I call?" That message can be immediately forwarded to a designated email address or even multiple email addresses. Gastonia is also looking at other ways to expand the scope of its new texting capabilities. In addition to electric, water and sewer services, the City also has a variety of other services it provides, including roads, parks, buses and an airport.

Kurtiak said he is thinking about using texting internally in the City's Information Technology Department. Fried said he might be able to use texting to leverage the City's web presence. TextPower has the ability to embed a small Uniform Resource Locator in a text message, he noted, so an embedded URL in a text about a rain delay of a Little League game could bring a customer to a website about all events in the city's parks. While those possibilities still lie in the future, Gastonia's experience with texting has opened up several opportunities for improving utility services and customer satisfaction, and "TextPower makes it so easy," Fried said. "They are Johnny on the spot."

This article was originally published in American Public Power Association's "Public Power Daily" The content was sponsored by TextPower with the cooperation and consent of The City of Gastonia, NC.