Georgia Public Power Utility Finds Texting Improves Customer Relations

Peter Maloney, February 23, 2023

Customer satisfaction can be illusive. It is easy to lose and hard to gain, but a Georgia public power utility has found that texting can help improve customer relations.

Thomasville Utilities in southern Georgia, near the border with the Florida Panhandle, started using TextPower to bolster its outage management system and interactive voice response (IVR) phone system.

"We looked at TextPower as an enhancement to outage notifications that would also provide customers with an additional method for reporting power outages," Chris White, assistant city manager for Thomasville, said.

When verifying or restoring outages in the utility's outage management system (OMS) the public power utility previously only had the ability to make an IVR call to the customer phone, but only customers calling in to report an outage would receive a call when power was restored.

Now, with TextPower, Thomasville has the ability to proactively inform customers of outages even if they are not at the affected location and were unaware there was an outage. The city can simply send a text to the customer's mobile phone that was imported into their TextPower database from the utility's Customer Information System.

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> GIS Systems Administrator
> City of Thomasville Utilities
> Thomasville, Georgia

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In addition, customers can report or check the status of an outage with a text. If a customer's cell phone is tied to multiple accounts, they can opt in for multiple locations to report or check the status of those meters. "This is a valuable tool for property owners," White said. "With one text they can receive the current status for each location" and, if power is out, they can see if a crew has been assigned and dispatched to restore power.

Originally, Thomasville added texting to its toolkit as an additional method of customer communication. That decision was partially driven by the fact that a large number of customers do not listen to the full message generated by the utility's IVR system. "Texting helps increase customer awareness as customers are more likely to read a text versus listen to an entire voice message," White said.

Industry data shows that setting up a clear channel of communication with customers is often not as simple as it might seem. Many people now routinely ignore phone calls, especially from unknown sources, but "less than 5 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 Twitter, would appear to offer customer contact similar to texting, but only 29 percent of Twitter messages are read, 20 percent of emails are opened or read, and 9 percent of Facebook messages elicit customer engagement. In Thomasville, a large number of the utility's customers do not report power outages, but "if customers do not receive a text verifying power has been restored, we often hear from them," White said.

With TextPower's proactive outage notifications, customers are now automatically informed of an outage affecting them and when power is restored. "This tends to decrease calls from those customers as they feel they do not need to report an outage that we are aware of," White said. "When we initially implemented texting, we were concerned about how customers might react, but the response has been positive."

The biggest benefit from using TextPower has been "how it has improved our ability to communicate with our customers," Andrew Wharton, GIS systems administrator at Thomasville Utilities, said. "Texting greatly improves messaging versus phone calls alone and is better received by our customers and citizens."

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That tracks aggregate TextPower customer data, which shows that the volume of calls to a utility's call center during outages drops by between 70 and 90 percent with the use of texting.

TextPower also gives Thomasville the opportunity to improve customer relations in another area. "By messaging customers that are approaching past due on their bill, we give them an opportunity to pay and avoid having their service disabled," Wharton said.

Thomasville began implementing TextPower in late 2016 and by 2017 it was up and running as an adjunct to its outage management system. "Milsoft assisted with the implementation as texting supplements our existing IVR, which made it easy for us," White said. There was some fine-tuning involved, but "surprisingly, other than server setup, the workload was minimal."

"TextPower works great for us," said White. "A lot of the time, we don't really think about it because it just functions as intended. On the rare occasion when there is a glitch, TextPower responds quickly and helps us determine where the issue is."

Ease of set up and positive customer responses encouraged Thomasville to expand its use of TextPower, and in 2018 the city began using texting for delinquent payment notices. "Notifying customers is a crucial aspect of the delinquency process," said White. "Enhancing our campaigns by adding texting increases the likelihood that customers will see that they are past due and make their payment."

White considers the TextPower campaigns as "a valuable tool in decreasing our delinquency rating." The use of TextPower with IVR as part of the delinquency process initiated in Cogsdale, the utility's customer information system, is "a great benefit to the city."
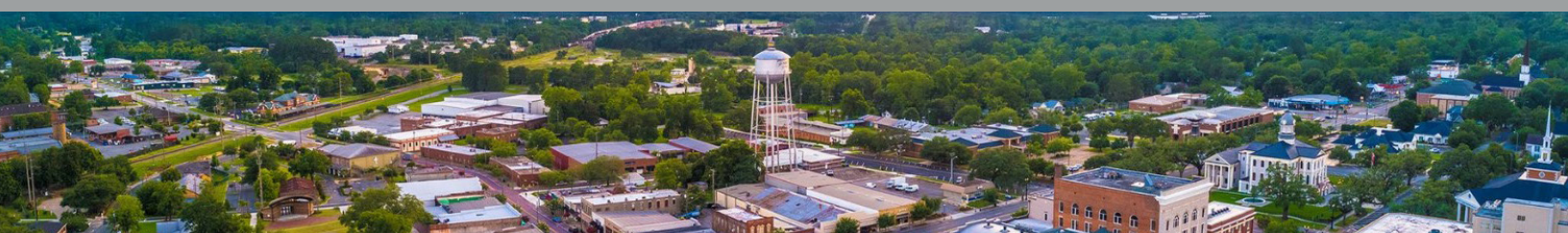
Thomasville's residential delinquencies fluctuate between 7 percent and 9 percent, though the numbers change every cycle. "The IVR and TextPower certainly help with keeping those numbers from escalating," Mark Parrillo, Thomasville's managing director of customer service, said.

To add delinquency notifications, the utility worked with TextPower to create or modify a campaign. "Other than defining what we want the script to do," there is little to do, so no training was needed, White said. Given the ease of adding new functions, Thomasville is exploring the idea of using TextPower to send out arranged payment reminders or for sending status updates to customers with prepaid plans.

Once again, TextPower customer feedback demonstrates the efficacy of using texting for customer communication. On average, utilities realized a 75 percent reduction in broken payment arrangements after they began sending customers reminders a day before the payment was due via TextPower.

Thomasville is also exploring the use of TextPower for other city services. Those include notifying city employees about events or sending alerts about hurricanes, tornadoes or active shooter incidents.

Demand management programs are another function many utilities have found to be a good match for texting. Utilities using TextPower to send customers notices during periods of peak demand have seen as much as a 50 percent reduction in load and peak time usage. Thomasville is also looking at using TextPower to inform citizens affected by a capital project or to keep citizens informed about the status of those projects.

Wharton noted that the city's water department still notifies customers by hanging notices on doorknobs. There is the potential to update that process by using texting to create greater customer engagement, he said.

Thomasville also sees a potential use for TextPower in conducting interactive surveys to gather feedback on proposed projects. As an example, White said the city could use texts to solicit feedback on planning projects such as parks. Texting could be used to survey citizens on what amenities they would prefer, walking trails, a swimming pool, or organized classes.

"There is no limitation to what we could do with texting," said Wharton.

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