

Outage Management Improvements Prompt N.C. Utility To Expand Use Of Texting

Peter Maloney, August 29, 2022



When a large storm sweeps through Lexington, N.C., it can bring down trees and threaten power lines, but it no longer swamps the public power utility's phone lines.

Lexington Utilities in March 2019 began using TextPower to send outage notifications. TextPower's service provides a two-way conduit to customers that has proved so useful the city is in the process of expanding it to other services it provides. In addition to serving approximately 19,500 electric customers, Lexington Utilities also provides natural gas to about 9,300 customers, and water and wastewater services to about 8,500 customers.

In recent years, the frequency and intensity of storms affecting Lexington has increased. "During a large outage we didn't have enough phone lines; the calls couldn't come in," Sammie Jo Prior, utility systems manager for Lexington, said. "So, we started looking at adding phone lines or doing something else."

On a normal, day-to-day basis, Lexington Utilities had plenty of phone lines, but during larger outages more people call, and "they could only call us or go through our website," Prior said. At that point, the utility began considering whether or not to add more phone lines.

Lexington Utilities was considering the possibility of having to double its existing 22 incoming phone lines. Around that time – 2017 and 2018 – texting was taking off and "our customers were getting used to texting with other companies, so they had come to expect it," Prior said. "So, we decided to take things to the next level by adding texting capability for our customers."

Now, when there is an outage, a text message automatically goes out to customers from Lexington Utilities, saving time for both the customer and the utility. Customers can also text the utility to report outages.



TextPower is also linked to dataVoice, Lexington Utilities' outage management system (OMS). So, when customers text "out" to the utility the locations are sent to the OMS, which takes over and dispatches a work crew.

Since it began using TextPower, Lexington Utilities has seen a **"very big decrease" in the phone calls** it has to handle during an outage event, Prior said. For example, she said, if there were an outage of 100 customers 50 might call to speak to a utility representative. Now, with TextPower the utility would receive about 10 calls in the same situation. "So, about 40 customers would be using TextPower as a more efficient way of alerting us to their power outage," Prior said.

In 2020, dataVoice recognized Lexington Utilities for outstanding customer communications with 48,418 texts sent, the most of any of their customers. TextPower has also helped Lexington Utilities boost its reliability rating, Prior said. In 2022, the American Public Power Association **awarded the utility** with the RP3 Diamond Level for its high proficiency in reliability, safety, workforce development, and system improvement.

Superior Customer Engagement

"When it comes to customer engagement, it is hard to beat texting," said Mark Nielsen, executive chairman and co-founder of TextPower, which is based in San Juan Capistrano, California, and provides text messaging solutions for mission-critical applications to utilities, banks, courts, and other organizations. Only cell phones can accept text messages, but about 62 percent of the population no longer has a landline, while cell phone penetration rates are very high. Ninety-seven percent of Americans now own a cell phone of some type, according to the Pew Research Center.

In addition, many people now routinely ignore phone calls, especially those from unknown sources. "They let them go to voice mail," but less than 2 percent of text messages are spam, so customers are less likely to ignore texts than they would a phone call, Nielsen said. With text messages, on the other hand, 98 percent are read and 95 percent are read within three minutes. The resulting immediacy easily surpasses that of placing a phone call.

In part, that is because of consumer protections built into the Telephone Consumer Protection Act, which restricts the way businesses can use text messages. A utility must obtain the phone number to send a text message in the "normal course of doing business," such as when a customer fills out a profile form. And a text message must provide a way for a customer to easily opt out of the service. Cellular carriers will also shut down text campaigns that engage in spam.



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Sammie Jo Prior
Utility Systems Manager
Lexington Utilities

Lexington Utilities’ opt-out rate was less than 5 percent and most of those were customers who had provided the utility with phone numbers that they had in the past but no longer had.

Other platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, would appear to offer similar reach and immediacy, but only about 30 percent of Twitter followers see any particular tweet while on Facebook only 10 to 15 percent of followers will see any given post (and social media requires the customer to first “follow” the utility).

Multiple Uses

Lexington Utilities has found texting to be useful not just during large outages. It also can be used for smaller outages and to provide a variety of updates and notices for customers, Prior said.

If the utility had opted to add more phone lines, they would likely be used only during periods when there was a spike in phone traffic. “We use TextPower every day now,” Prior said.

That also underscores the economics of texts versus phones. On an ongoing basis, the cost of a single text message is pennies, while the per unit cost of an interactive voice response message is a dime or more and the cost of a live call is measured in dollars, Nielsen said.

In addition to pushing outage notifications out to customers, Lexington Utilities uses TextPower to provide customers with estimates of restoration times. For instance, if a utility pole is down, they could inform a customer about the nature of the problem and tell them the repair could take more time.

Prior said a customer can also now text when their power goes out or check the status of an outage. The utility can also automatically text a “restoral notification” to let a customer know when a problem is fixed. If a customer’s power is not restored, they have the option of calling a number texted to them or texting “out” again. In one recent case, that option uncovered a smaller outage that had occurred when a transformer blew during an outage.

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In another unusual case, some customers' breakers tripped during a recent outage. Power was restored, but customers were still in the dark. Lexington Utilities was able to text the affected customers and tell them to check their breakers and flip them on if they didn't have service.

"That helped the customers. They didn't have to sit there without power, and it helped us. We didn't have to send trucks or knock on doors to tell customers how to fix the problem," Prior said. "Before TextPower, that would have put us in a bad position." Texts can also be used to alert customers to other types of service disruptions. "We can use TextPower to alert customers if we are going to have to turn off their power briefly to do maintenance," Prior said. "That is especially important with so many people working from home now."

Expanding Services

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With their success to date with TextPower, Lexington Utilities is now expanding the uses of the service. The city is in the process of setting up a texting service for its sanitation department. For instance, it could send texts to customers to let them know when their trash day has moved because of a holiday. "We anticipate that we will be rolling that out in the next month or two," Prior said.

While Lexington is now focused on getting its Public Service Department up and running on texting, in the future it could look to using texting for its Water Department to inform customers about broken water lines, Prior said. TextPower's services can easily be expanded to cover a wide variety of services. When the company signs an agreement with a public power utility, it gives the city the ability to use the service outside of the utility department without any additional implementation or license fees. The city only pays for the additional usage. So, a city's recreation department could use the service to send texts about field usage, or the public works department could text citizens about planned road closures.

Those services can be set up as separate campaigns with distinct keywords that enable a city to allocate costs to the proper department. In addition, the group tag function can be used to segment different customer classes within a campaign to provide more focused messaging.

"We are constantly looking for other services we could add with TextPower," Prior said.

For more information about Arcos TextPower, visit the company's website, www.arcos-

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