Public power utility looks to build on initial success with texting

Peter Maloney, September 20, 2020

Rock Hill Utilities, a South Carolina public power utility that began using text messages as an outage notification tool in May, is now looking at expanding its use for other functions. to save time and money.

Rock Hill Utilities uses texting to automatically send outage notifications to affected customers, saving time for both the customer and the utility. Customers can also send texts to the utility to report outages. And, with the text messaging system directly connected to the utility's outage management system, it can pinpoint the location and extent of an outage and possibly help isolate the cause and even provide data for predictive analysis.

Texting has greatly cut down on the calls that utility staff have to handle while providing quicker, more accurate communications with customers, Mike Jolly, director of utilities for Rock Hill Utilities, said. Now, when the utility declares an outage, a message is sent automatically to customers.

"We had a large outage a couple of weeks ago. In the past, we probably would have had hundreds of calls. We had two," he said.

Customers appear to be enthusiastic as well. About 95% of customers have chosen to participate in the text service, which is provided by TextPower, a company based in San Juan Capistrano, California, that provides text messaging solutions for mission-critical applications at over 140 utilities across the country.

Almost immediately after it began using TextPower for outage notifications, Rock Hill Utilities formed a team to begin exploring what other uses the utility might perform using texting services. “I started thinking, ‘How much time and money could we save?’” Steven Varnadore, the utility’s power and communications manager, said. “It makes us more efficient and saves overtime and truck rolls.”

In June, the utility began using the texting service to send a daily inspirational message to its employees. The exploratory team is now looking at several other uses. “There has been a lot of discussion about customer service and billing,” Jolly said.

Rock Hill Utilities runs a combined utility system that provides electric, water and sewer services to about 95,000 people in the city and the surrounding area. The region has a lot of apartment buildings and a lot of people moving from one apartment to another. For the utility, that means move-ins and move - outs are frequent, Lori Thomas, operating revenue administrator for Rock Hill, said.

Texting allows the utility to push out a text message to confirm dates and locations with a greater accuracy and higher response rates. Typically, that was a function the utility did with email. “Almost everyone has a smart device in their hand, but not a laptop to check their email,” Thomas said.

Another function Rock Hill Utilities is looking at is using texting for is disconnect notices for non-payment. The utility currently use s a phone tree for those notices but reaching the customer can be difficult since land line numbers can change.

For quick and reliable communication, texting has many advantages, Mark Nielsen, TextPower’s executive chairman, said. About 59% of U.S. households no longer have a land line, instead using their cellular phone as their primary number, Nielsen says. And, compared with other forms of communication, text message response rates are high.

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Almost all text messages are read, and 95% are read within three minutes of being received. Other platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are useful, says Nielsen, but only about 30% of followers see a given tweet and only 16% of Facebook followers see a given post. Most importantly, he says, the percentage of customers who follow their utility ranges from less than 1% to maybe 25%.

In addition, Nielsen points out that less than 2% of text messages are spam, so customers are less likely to ignore them than they would a phone call or email.

In part, that is because of protections built into the Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA), which restricts the way businesses can use text messages, though there is a specific ruling by the FCC relating to utilities. Texts should relate to a utility's service and not be used to sell a service or product (informational or emergency communications). And the utility should provide an easy way for a customer to opt out of the service, such as replying "Quit" or "Stop".

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Rock Hill Utilities

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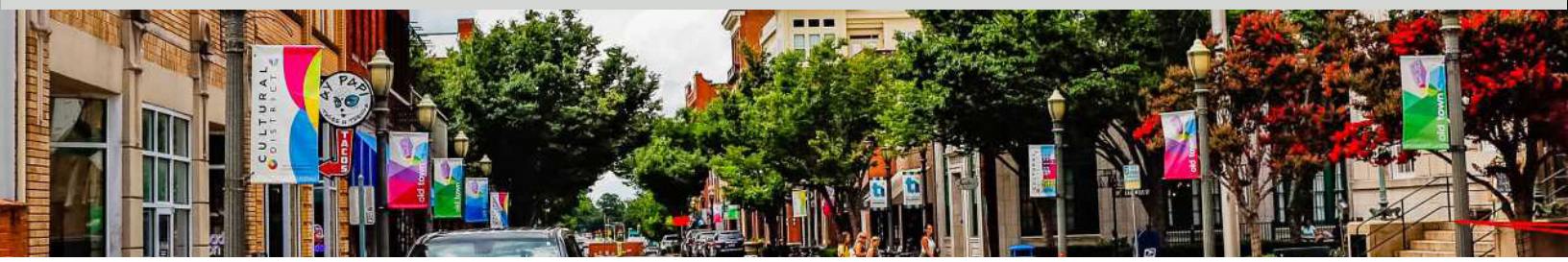

The best way to bring customers into the service is to enroll them with an opt-out option, rather than an offer that allows them to opt in, says Varnadore, who noted Rock Hill's high retention rate for text-enabled customers.

Varnadore has also found that texting has brought some changes to the way the utility operates. In the past, customers would call in outages, and a dispatcher would collect the information and declare an outage. The lag time involved in using phones built in room for discrepancies to be cleared up as the process went along.

With texting, however, "we have to follow outages more closely and update restoration times more accurately," Varnadore said. Any accidental declaration of an outage is likely to be corrected by customer feedback, he said. "It causes more precision on our end and staying up on the outage." Nonetheless, he said, the benefits outweigh some of the changes the utility had to make.

Rock Hill Utilities is also using TextPower to send customer notices for scheduled repair and maintenance work. And the utility is exploring expanding the use of texting to enable customers to send in notices about other safety concerns, such as water or sewer leaks, and wants customers to be able to text photos as a way of better equipping repair crews to respond to problems more appropriately and accurately.

Expanding texting capabilities had been on the utility's "road map" for quite a while but was put on hold while the utility replaced about 70,000 meters with advanced metering infrastructure (AMI).

That project wrapped up about 18 months ago, and Rock Hill Utilities revisited its texting options.

Looking back, the lesson learned is "not to wait so long," Jolly said. "I'm glad we did it. I wish we had done it earlier."

For more information about TextPower, visit the company's website, www.textpower.com.

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