Key Components of Effective Outage Communications

At least once per year, 87% of utilities face an emergency outage event; nearly 25% deal with as many as five per year. Your ability to manage these outages affects overall customer satisfaction as well as your relationships with regulators and government officials. One important tool in a comprehensive and effective storm management program is electronic communications.

To maximize your range and effectiveness, electronic communication initiatives must be integrated with other types of communications, including public relations and media outreach, interactive voice response, and automated call backs. Media communications should provide all of the information necessary for public consumption, including restoration objectives and trends. Media interaction also establishes a favorable impression of the restoration effort.

An overview of best practices for effective management of storm outage communications follows:

A Comprehensive Plan

The key to any communications program is to develop a comprehensive plan that includes measurable objectives, such as a reduction in call center inquiries and improved customer satisfaction. The plan must also identify the various audiences involved—both internal and external. External audiences include:

- Large business customers
- Small/medium business customers
- Residential customers
- Government/civic officials
- Community leaders
- Public safety organizations
- Other utilities
- Emergency management organizations
- The media

Once the audiences have been identified, you must determine the appropriate communication channels for reaching them. For instance, utility personnel should contact large business customers by phone or face-to-face. For residential customers, email alerts, text messages, or automated call backs are essential. You must also determine what resources are available, how you will measure success with each audience, and the appropriate timing—before, during, or after the storm. Finally, a good plan must effectively anticipate budgets. When using electronic communications, you must determine how much it will cost to send email or text updates to various audiences.

Addressing all customer segments is a companywide effort, encompassing multiple functional groups, including marketing and communications; internal and external engagement—call centers and field representatives; operations and information technology (IT). The primary responsibility of the marketing and communications team is to prepare and inform customers throughout the duration of the event.
Before the Storm

Create an online storm center portal (microsite) where customers can receive weather updates, safety information, tips on storm preparation, and links to government agencies and other organizations that provide disaster relief such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Red Cross. Include an outage map and continual updates on the restoration process. Offer this information in both English and Spanish.

This site can also be used as a customer preference center where they can update their email addresses and mobile phone information. Include features that will allow customers to report outages online. Additional steps that should be taken before an outage occurs, include the following:

- Update additional storm alert channels, including Twitter, and Facebook
- Reach out to large businesses, government officials and the media regarding preliminary plans and access to update information
- Prepare a backup plan in case all technology fails

During the Storm

If outages occur during a storm, customers want to know three things:

1. **Does the utility know my power is out?**
2. **When will my power be restored?**
3. **What caused the outage?**

Affirm your commitment to timely communications by providing the following information through emails and text alerts:

- Outage updates
- Links to your website for up-to-the-minute information
- Specific causes
- Outage size/scope
- Number of customers affected
- Estimated time of restoration (ETR)

Providing accurate and timely ETRs has a direct effect on your customer’s perception of restoration efforts and should be communicated proactively using a variety of communication methods. Use internal metrics to monitor and improve ETRs and outage performance.

The frequency of communications will vary depending on the severity of the storm, but should be delivered at least once every 24 hours throughout the event. Personalized messages will increase customer acceptance of automated messages. Other effective strategies include the following:

- Integrate proactive communications with your utility Outage Management System whenever possible to provide crew assignment status and personalized ETR. Update customers proactively when those estimates change.
• Provide two-way interaction with customers by having someone monitor and respond to all inquiries via email and social media channels and provide short message service (SMS) response capabilities. For example, in addition to receiving outage updates, provide customers with the ability to text “STATUS” to a utility short code and receive an automated response containing the current ETR.

• Have field teams submit video or images of repair work that is being done and share those on Twitter and Facebook. If video is captured, set up a YouTube channel dedicated to storm updates and repair work.

• Provide customers with additional information about the outage when they call in a report.

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<tr>
<th>Social Media Spotlight</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Before Storm</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Duke Energy Storm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Report an outage quickly, Save our #: IN 1-800-543-3543 FL 1-810-288-6483 OH/KY 1-800-543-3599 NC/SC 1-800-769-3756 DEP 1-800-419-6356</td>
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| **During Storm**       |
| National Grid shared a link. March 3 |
| As the effects of the winter storm linger, crews are working throughout New England to bring all customers experiencing outages back online as safely and quickly as possible. If you are still without service, please report your outage by calling 1-800-465-1212 or visiting Outage Central from a computer or smartphone. |

| **After Storm**        |
| AEP Ohio              |
| Power restored to 95% of customers after July 30 storm. ow.ly/mVH0q |

**After the Storm**

During recovery efforts, you must have a plan for addressing the worst weather conditions, while effectively informing customers about the outage and when they can expect their power to be restored. Good communications make it easier to support and maintain the perception of a successful restoration effort and a well-run utility. Your electronic communications plan should include the following:

• The delivery of a post-storm update on restoration progress, thanking customers for their continued support

• Power restoration updates on Twitter and Facebook

• Measurable objectives that can be used to evaluate the program’s success

• A determination of what worked and what could be improved upon prior to future storm events

Electronic communications help deploy resources where and when they are needed most; bringing a community based approach to prioritizing repairs. They also improve coordination efforts with municipalities, which helps to identify areas that are not being addressed by the overall restoration efforts.

**Questline—Your Partner in Storm Communications.**

Questline’s outage communication services leverage its best-in-class email alert service, providing your utility with a step-by-step process on how to best communicate with customers. Questline will help you prepare customers for an upcoming storm event, detail any power disruptions affecting them, and positively promote restoration efforts. Questline has also established the resources and infrastructure to provide email alerts after hours.