UTILITY MANAGEMENT

Customer Satisfaction

High-performance Data, Response, Customer Contact, and Social Media

Quick Facts

- Advances in technology improve responsiveness and help maintain a reliable product and quality services
- Customer contact centers provide an opportunity for optimum feedback and problem resolution
- Establishing and managing a presence on social media sites is essential for connecting with today’s consumers

Overview

Customer satisfaction is one of the ten attributes of effectively managed water utilities. Elements that characterize customer satisfaction include reliable, responsible, and affordable service, plus solicitation of timely customer feedback to maintain responsiveness to customer needs and emergencies (EPA 2008). To achieve these targets, best practices range from surveying customers’ satisfaction, tracking complaints, and providing accurate billing, to using social media and providing an effective customer contact center. Water utilities can determine where they currently stand in customer satisfaction by using the Benchmarking Tool developed in the WRF report, Performance Benchmarking for Effectively Managed Water Utilities (Matichich et al. 2014).

Understanding Customer Satisfaction

Interaction Opportunities

A water utility has multiple customer interactions each day through its product, service and staff. These interactions can help improve a utility’s image and relationship with customers. Better service, more information, and opportunities for customers to be involved can help to meet and exceed customer expectations.
Maintain Confidence Through Quality Drinking Water
The absence of taste, odor, and color in water helps maintain customers’ confidence in the quality of their drinking water. Secondary Maximum Contaminant Levels help utilities control these aspects of water quality. The webcast for the WRF project, Improving Water Quality and Customer Satisfaction using Guidance from the SMCLs, provides a review of the SMCL levels and the contaminant sources and risks, and offers recommendations for minimization of ongoing taste and odor events (Dietrich 2014).

Communicate With Customers and the Public
Developing a strategic communication plan helps ensure that a utility delivers consistent messages to all the publics it serves—ratepayers, elected officials, the press, and other audiences. Reports providing tools and guidance include: Strategic Communication Planning: A Guide for Water Utilities (Mobley et al. 2006), Customer Attitudes and Behavior and the Impact of Communication Efforts (Tatham et al. 2004), and Communicating the Value of Water: An Introductory Guide for Water Utilities (Means et al. 2008).

Utilities must be proactive in providing accurate information that answers customers’ questions. When a contaminant is newly-detected, it is important to communicate about water quality concerns. Useful guidance can be found in these reports: Contaminant Risk Management Communication Strategy and Tools (Mobley et al. 2010) and Water Utility Tool for Responding to Emerging Contaminant Issues (Daniel and Bywater 2012).

Meter Reading And Billing
Almost all water utilities carry out a series of business processes that encompass the meter-to-cash cycle. The cycle begins with initiating service to customers and installing a water meter; it ends with recording revenue for the service(s) provided. This cycle repeats on a regular basis as water is consumed, customers are notified and billed, payments are received, and ledger accounts are updated. A general cycle is shown in Figure 1.

Most of the processes that are part of the meter-to-cash cycle rely heavily on technologies to make the process more efficient. The larger a utility is, the more benefit the utility receives from automating parts of the meter-to-cash cycle business processes.

A Customer Information System (CIS) is at the heart of the meter to cash cycle. Key users of the CIS are contact/call center staff, and cashiering staff, who use the system day in and day out. The meter reading and field service staff also rely heavily on this system, although they may not directly interact with it. Effective Practices to Select, Acquire, and Implement a Utility CIS explores case studies and provides a wide array of recommendations for utilities preparing to implement a CIS. The research report identifies business practices that can result in a successful CIS implementation (Rettie et al. 2005). A follow-up project, Planning and Implementing CIS and AMR/AMI Projects, explores current industry trends and identifies challenges, opportunities, and good practice for implementing CIS and AMR/AMI projects. It also presents case studies of utilities that have implemented CIS and AMR/AMI projects (Rettie et al. 2016).

The technology shift from Automatic Meter Reading to Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) has gained widespread success. AMI improves customer satisfaction through benefits ranging from more accurate billing and early leak detection to real-time diagnostics, theft detection and improved preventive maintenance (Olstein et al. 2010). Advanced Metering Infrastructure:


Figure 1. Meter-to-cash cycle
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Best Practices for Water Utilities provides a guide to AMI (Schlenger et al. 2011).

A utility’s collections process can have strong implications for customer satisfaction. Nationally, about 15% of residential water customers are constantly at risk of payment problems. Best Practices in Customer Payment Assistance Programs presents a framework for tactics related to positive and negative experiences with customer service (Cromwell et al. 2010).

Customer Contact Centers
An optimized customer contact center enables high levels of customer communication by employing the latest technology to gather, store and index customer data. The availability of more accurate information from AMI and GIS systems, linked with interactive voice response (IVR) and Work Management Systems, provides call centers with critical information to identify leaks, handle calls, issue service interruption warnings, and dispatch field workers on a timely basis (Olstein et al. 2010).

Practices For High Performance
- Select the right customer service representatives
- Provide ongoing training, coaching and salary incentives
- Focus on employee satisfaction
- Employ the latest technologies
- Implement automatic metering
- Offer a variety of customer payment options
- Actively seek customer feedback
- Focus on first-call resolution

(Patrick and Kolansky 2006)

Service Reliability
Customer feedback can support and enhance service reliability. Customers may be a utility’s first indication that something is wrong with water quality, operations, or infrastructure issues. Staff should be trained to receive, investigate, and resolve customer issues (Whelton et al. 2007). Field service employees, who comprise more than 50% of a typical water utility workforce, play an important role in service reliability and customer satisfaction. They provide critical front-line services such as water quality sampling, emergency response, inspection, and repair. WRF’s Asset Management Knowledge Portal provides resources for improvement.

Social Media
Social media, including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, blogs, and more, will have implications for water utilities over the next 10 to 20 years. Customers use social media for billing issues, to provide praise or complain, get information about an outage, or schedule service. Many customers expect to be able to interact with providers like water utilities and will no longer accept one-way communication (Brueck et al. 2012).

For water utilities, social media can be used to promote the pure tap water brand, post alerts, increase visibility, disseminate information on new projects, and better understand public sentiment toward the utility. WRF’s report, Steering Innovation in Water Utility Finance and Management, identifies strategies for developing a social media program (Hughes et al. 2013). The WRF project, “Effective Use of Social Media for Water Utilities,” will guide utilities on how to integrate social media into their day-to-day operations (Eckl et al., forthcoming).

References


