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Advanced communications help NPPD through worst storm in history

NPPD used automated outbound calling to let affected customers know of rolling blackouts required to maintain power in central Nebraska. Providing information upfront helped customers plan for their safety and comfort.

The Dec. 29, 2006, ice storm was the most devastating storm in the history of Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD). Storm damage was centered on the city of Kearney and 35 surrounding communities in central Nebraska, but federal disaster relief was declared in 57 counties. Total damage was estimated at more than \$200 million statewide, with NPPD's electrical system accounting for \$140 million of that damage. Nearly 12,000 customers – about 12% of the customer base – lost power, some for extended periods of time.

“We have had other major storms, but nothing of this magnitude as far as the amount of damage that it wreaked on our system. The storm actually cut our transmission system in half in central Nebraska,” says Elizabeth Boesch, NPPD's manager of corporate communications and public relations.

In the days following the storm, utility leaders were forced to call for rolling blackouts in two communities to maintain power in central Nebraska. NPPD leaders had determined that rolling blackouts would be necessary to maintain the electric load coming into Kearney, where all but one of the utility's five transmission feeds had been lost. “There were major portions of the town that had been out of power. This was January in Nebraska, so it was cold. We were able to gradually restore a couple of feeds into Kearney, but the system was very fragile. So when people started to get their power back on, the load started to pick up and we were concerned about losing another transmission feed and putting people out of power again,” Boesch explains. “We had to make a decision to do rolling blackouts, which we don't like to do, but it was the right decision to make.”

Customer communications in the storm's aftermath were critical, not only for those who lost power but for people in other parts of the state and around the country who needed to know what was going on with associates, friends and loved ones. NPPD was undertaking a huge effort to rebuild and repair 37 transmission line segments that had been knocked out

Company profile

Nebraska Public Power District (NPPD) is Nebraska's largest electric generating utility. Its service territory includes all or parts of 91 of Nebraska's 93 counties. NPPD is a public corporation and political subdivision of the state of Nebraska. The majority of NPPD's revenue is derived from wholesale power supply agreements with 52 towns and 24 rural public power districts and cooperatives. NPPD also serves about 80 communities at the retail level. Over 5,000 miles of transmission lines make up the NPPD electrical grid system, which delivers power to about one million Nebraskans.



by broken poles, toppled structures and damaged electrical equipment, and the utility needed to get the word out that it was working hard to restore power.

The utility used every medium at its disposal – including TV, radio, newspapers and the NPPD Web site – to help paint a picture of the devastation and constantly update the public on power restoration efforts.

But mass communications were not the utility's only means of contact with the public. The NPPD call center was prepared to notify thousands of individual customers who had been directly impacted by the storm damage that they were likely to experience rolling blackouts. While additional customer service reps and other call center support were on board to help handle the call volume, Ohio-based Twenty First Century Communications' Universal Communications System (UCS) was automatically dialing customers who lived in the rolling blackout area.

Although NPPD had never used UCS for this purpose before, the system was put into service as a timely emergency tool that allowed the utility to proactively communicate with the right customers at the right moment. The system can be used via land line, cell phone, fax, pager, PDA and email. It is capable of handling large volumes of inbound and outbound calls at a moment's notice, according to Twenty First Century Communications.

On January 03, 2007, NPPD used the Universal Communications System to activate four call-out campaigns that resulted in 6,280 completed customer calls out of 17,156 attempts made over a 24-hour period. When NPPD's calls were unanswered or met with busy signals or operator intercepts, UCS would attempt a number of additional calls to contact as many people as possible, according to the vendor.

While residential customers were involved in service interruptions, industrial customers also were asked by NPPD account managers to power down operations as the restoration work continued. "We have a lot of major industries in Kearney... and we asked them to voluntarily stay offline so that we wouldn't lose the entire community," says Boesch.

Outbound calling up and running in minutes

Plugging into UCS was a simple matter for members of the internal UCS team, who had the system up and running in minutes. "With Universal Communications, we were able to pull out of our [GE PowerOn] outage management system the areas that were going to be involved in the rolling blackouts, which took about five to 10 minutes. We can take that information, upload it into the Universal Communications System, and it will automatically start calling people. It had called most of these people in a certain area within a matter of two hours," says Nicole Kramer, customer service and delivery representative.

Having the ability to phone customers in the affected area worked very well for NPPD. "We knew we were going to have public service announcements on the radio, but we didn't want people to panic and think we were taking the whole town down. So it was really nice to be able to have the call center call sections of customers at a time," Boesch comments. "We decided to take different sections of town out for six-hour periods ... and we only took the customers out if the load required us to."

Although automated outbound calling is not new to NPPD, this system – implemented in 2005 – has proven faster and more flexible than the previous system, adds Kramer. “We were able to do it before 2005, just not as quickly or efficiently,” she says. The system’s greatest benefit to the utility during the blackouts was “outstanding customer service.”

Beyond emergency outbound calling, the system has a diversity of applications at NPPD. “We have expanded it outside the call center within Nebraska Public Power to other departments and they’ve been utilizing it for security plans, employee callout and that kind of thing,” Kramer explains. “It’s basically a calling tree system. We currently use it for our collections calls to notify customers that they are delinquent. We also use it to notify customers if we have a planned outage and we need to do some maintenance in their area that will cause them to go without power.”

Down the line, the Universal Communications System will be one of the ingredients in the extensive emergency plan for NPPD’s nuclear power plant, Boesch states. “Our plan is to incorporate the use of the Universal Communications System in case it would ever be needed or to [use it to] address other types of crises within our system.”

All communications on full throttle

While the UCS was targeting specific residential customers with timely information, the mass communications efforts were on full throttle. Boesch served as a public affairs director for the emergency communications center, which was set up in corporate headquarters and staffed with personnel skilled in public relations. “Our CEO and other executives were also available and out in front assisting with customer communications and managing restoration. We brought in a group of employees trained to staff what we call a rumor control function, and they were able to take some spillover calls from the call center. Our call center also takes after-hours calls for more than a dozen other utilities within Nebraska, and many of them were impacted, so our call center was taking calls for them as well,” Boesch explains.

With calls coming in from all directions as well as an avalanche of emails, “the call center was quickly overloaded,” says Boesch. “It was really nice that not only are [the customer service reps] very skilled, but they have a lot of good technical tools to be able to help with that amount of calls, which we have never experienced before and hope we never do again.”

The UCS and other communications tools are necessary to provide superior customer service at NPPD. “We have a very good relationship with our customers, and we believe that we need to continue to invest in technology because the world of information has become [instantaneous]. The more quickly we can respond to customers to let them know we are aware of their plight ... [the sooner we can give] them some comfort in knowing that the utility is being responsive and will restore them to service as quickly as possible,” Boesch comments.

She points out that the company Web site was another dynamic tool that served this purpose well. "We manage our Web site within corporate communications, and we were able to dispatch photographers and videographers and very quickly put pictures of the damage online so that the world could see the devastation to our system. It not only helped customers to understand what was going on, it helped the news media to tell our story. It helped regulators to assist us in getting the federal emergency disaster declared quickly, because if you weren't in that immediate area, it was pretty hard to understand how decimated our system was. We patrolled over 2,600 miles of line and we had 37 line segments out of service ... over 1,000 transmission miles out of service ... 18 substations out of service ... 300 miles of conductor down on the ground, and over 1,100 structures damaged. So this was huge."



Photos like this were posted on NPPD's Web site so customers, the media and others could see the impact of the ice storm.

Most customers were restored within two weeks. For customers who had lengthy wait times for service restoration, NPPD and the Nebraska Emergency Management Agency trucked in mobile generators. "We ended up having mobile generation in 14 communities," says Boesch.

The communication effort was a great success in all areas of the company as NPPD employees stepped into their emergency roles and bent over backwards to provide the best customer service under the most trying conditions. "I truly think it was a combination of everything," Boesch comments. As for the call center, "they absolutely went the extra mile. They were heroes to a lot of people and a lot of other utilities."

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