



Case Study

Virtual Mutual Assistance – A Value Proposition for Customer Care

Mutual assistance is practiced by all utilities in times of trouble. It is the cornerstone of an industry that truly values safety and service. Until now, mutual assistance has always meant line crews, equipment and other resources directly related to actual restoration efforts.

However, there is a real need for support on the customer care side of the business as well.

THE CHALLENGE

Hurricanes, ice storms, tornadoes and other disasters consistently result in extended outages and lengthy restoration periods for utilities all over the United States. Changing weather patterns and earlier, longer storm seasons have exacerbated the problem. December 2007 saw early, major winter storms throughout the Midwest requiring extensive mutual assistance in the field.

In addition to the obvious restoration challenges, these extended outages have a major impact on utility companies' abilities to maintain business operations and provide the high level of customer service that is expected in their industry.

The unexpected spike in call activity associated with storms can quickly overwhelm call centers. Most utilities manage spiking outage call traffic using interactive voice response (IVR) technology. Automation has brought increased efficiency and customer satisfaction to the industry. As outages extend into days and weeks, however, utility customers eventually need to speak with live customer service professionals (CSPs).

The 2004 hurricane season was particularly hard on Florida utilities. The state of Florida was hit with four hurricanes that year, providing a whole new perspective on utilities' needs during and after a major storm. Florida Power & Light lost two of its main call centers.

Call Center support became the primary "Lessons Learned" topic for the Tampa Electric Company. Previously during emergencies, Tampa Electric had staffed its call center with company team members from other departments such as regulatory affairs, accounting or legal. However, the company learned that in order to truly meet customers' needs, it is necessary to have actual CSPs answer those calls. After a major storm or during an extended outage, the skills and experience of professionals are a necessity.

Skilled utility CSPs understand customer needs and have the techniques to calm the callers. CSPs know how to express empathy with customers' initial fears, anger or worries about an outage or other service-related incident. They can assist customers by walking them through the available options. And they know how to get to the real issue – is a wire down? Is a transformer blown? Does the customer need assistance, or should she or he leave the area in the interest of safety?

The very next year, Alberto M. Osterling of Pepco Holdings, Inc. (PHI) and Barbara Powers of the Tampa Electric Company began a dialogue about utility mutual assistance in the call center. They explored the idea of flying customer service representatives from one utility to another to provide call center support.

PHI and Tampa Electric joined into an agreement among the members of their Mutual Assistance Group, the Southeast Electric Exchange (S.E.E.), to support one another by actually *sending* customer service professionals to damaged areas to work in the call centers of utilities in need.

However, the group recognized that transporting CSPs to storm-impacted areas would have its own set of challenges.

- It would add to the receiving utilities' logistical concerns.
- Infrastructure in the affected areas may have been destroyed by the storm.
- Hotels may be filled to capacity with local residents displaced from damaged homes.
- It would be necessary to train responding CSPs on the local systems.
- Responding CSPs would need secure access to back end systems.

The S.E.E.'s Mutual Assistance team continued to discuss avenues to address these issues. They explored the concept of *virtual* call center mutual assistance. Could this be accomplished using telephony and the Internet? Was there a common thread among utilities that could facilitate this? Could this type of program be developed alongside existing IVR systems for outage reporting?

They identified Twenty First Century Communications (TFCC) – provider of the High Volume Call Answering (HVCASM) system – as the link between many utility companies, and they brought these questions to TFCC.

THE APPROACH

Twenty First Century viewed this challenge as a logical evolution of its HVCASM system, which handles outage calls with automation. TFCC also recognizes that while IVR handles the immediate spiking call traffic, over time utility customers will need to speak with live CSPs. TFCC agreed to work with Tampa Electric and a consortium of utilities to devise a strategy for call center mutual assistance.

A task force composed of Twenty First Century's utility communications experts and personnel from the S.E.E. utilities was formed to develop the framework for a solution.

The utilities identified a thorough set of requirements, customer needs and potential challenges. Some obvious obstacles were the different methods between utilities for reporting outages, exchanging information and transferring calls across different carriers. Infrastructure would be necessary to connect utilities' communications to one another.

The solution needed to provide support on very short notice, minimize or eliminate logistical challenges, include a common outage response process, utilize trained utility CSPs and leverage existing technologies.

It quickly became clear that TFCC had the necessary tool set to develop a practical, cost-effective way for utilities to help each other in their call centers.

Twenty First Century has a working relationship with over 80 U.S. utilities and has the infrastructure in place to communicate with most utility companies' back-end systems. The company maintains network capacity to handle in excess of 100,000 calls per hour and has a robust telecom infrastructure capable of moving calls among the various carriers.

The collaboration between TFCC, Tampa Electric and other stakeholder utilities resulted in the **Mutual Assistance Routing System**, or **MARS** (patent pending). "In keeping with TFCC's practice of providing customized solutions to utilities of all types and sizes, MARS was designed **by** utilities **for** utilities," stated Janet Mushrush, Twenty First Century's Director of Utility Sales.

THE RESULT

The Mutual Assistance Routing System enables utilities to automatically redirect high volumes of outage calls to *other utilities* during crises and times of peak activity. When needed, "requesting utilities" call upon "responding utilities" to answer a designated number of the requesting utilities' incoming customer calls. Because TFCC's robust network is capable of moving calls across disparate telecom carriers, re-routing calls between utilities is no longer an obstacle.

Responding utility customer service professionals gather information from customers via a simple Web-based form – a standardized input screen that all utilities can use. Minimal training is required. Through MARS, the CSP is able to provide restoration information directly to the customer. Then MARS seamlessly feeds data directly into the requesting utility's internal systems and generates outage tickets.

"MARS is the true essence of mutual assistance, greatly enhancing the ability of utilities to help each other by directly helping each other's customers," said Barbara Powers, Tampa Electric's Director of Customer Services. "One thing I think we've all learned this decade, amid the many destructive weather events we've seen, is that just about any community anywhere could be in need at any given time. But with qualified customer service professionals across the country making efficient use of leveraged technologies, utilities are able to assist each other more effectively than ever."

Ms. Powers will present the Mutual Assistance Routing System at Chartwell's Energy Marketing & Customer Service Conference & Expo (EMACS) in October and the Chartwell Outage Communications Summit in November.

THE BENEFIT

The Mutual Assistance Routing System:

- ✓ Leverages existing technology
- ✓ Eliminates travel, housing and training costs
- ✓ Enables rapid deployment by responding utilities
- ✓ Features a common user guide and training program
- ✓ Uses standardized Web browser screens
- ✓ Provides live agent response by utility subject matter experts

For more information visit:

www.tfcci.com

Or call 1.800.382.8356

About TFCC

Twenty First Century Communications, Inc. is an Ohio-based, privately held corporation founded in 1989. TFCC is the leader in "hosted" emergency communication services, with more than 18 years experience in providing High Volume Call Answering (HVCASM) and emergency notification services. Twenty First Century serves over 80 major utility clients in North America, covering more than 70 percent of American utility customers as well as serving over 4 million customer meters in the United Kingdom. TFCC serves more than 200 clients with a client database representing more than 100 million contact records. In addition to electric utility outage and workforce management support, TFCC provides emergency call handling services to the American Red Cross, many federal agencies, and numerous county emergency management agencies.

About the Authors

Janet Mushrush has been with Twenty First Century Communications, Inc. (TFCC) for the past 12 years. Her early experience as a Project/Client Manager provided her with an in-depth knowledge of the inner workings of both TFCC and client utilities and enabled her to transition easily to her current position of Director of Utility Sales. She is now responsible for generating new business in the electric utility markets in the U.S. and Canada. She also functions as primary client liaison for over 80 of the company's existing utility clients, and she works with them to identify new opportunities to expand TFCC's offerings.

Prior to joining TFCC, she was Managing Director of Sales and Alliances for Origin Technology in Business for the Americas Region, responsible for manufacturing systems integration in North, Central and South America. During her tenure with Origin, she also managed three branches of the company's software services division in Ft. Wayne, Cincinnati and Columbus.

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Barb Powers has been with Tampa Electric for eight years. She has her Masters in Industrial Engineering for North Carolina State University and spent her first eleven years in manufacturing with Northern Telecom, Frito-Lay and ABB. She then went into consulting with Deloitte Consulting in the Utility Practice where she spent her time with various utilities helping them improve their processes.

Having discovered she had enough mileage points for a lifetime she started with Tampa Electric in 2000 and has lead process improvement projects for various departments including Meter Reading, New Construction, Lighting, Field Services, Meter Operations, Large Account Billing, and various others. With Tampa Electric she has held the positions of Manger of New Construction, Manger of System Service (trouble department) and is now the Director of Customer Service. Her current duties include New Construction, Account Management, Conservation Programs, Renewable Energy, Corporate Credit, Bad Debt, and Billing and Payments.

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