



How to Make a Business Case for Investing in a Utility Customer Portal

9 Ideas

for Utility Billing & Customer Service Managers

Introduction

Public trust in your utility happens when the service community believes that its interests are aligned with the interests of your organization. In order to earn and reinforce this trust, utilities have to continually demonstrate that serving customers is a commitment woven in to everything they do.

The level of responsibility demanded of utilities is much higher than with other organizations. This is because service providers have essentially been granted a monopoly to

operate. Customers expect clean, healthy drinking water and reliable waste water management, delivered on an uninterrupted basis. They also expect a variety of other services.

Consumer engagement solutions turn out to be an effective platform for enhancing public trust and performing useful duties. For example, they help improve the efficiency of internal operations and generate cost savings. This leads to more affordable services for customers.

They provide useful tools so customers can better understand their consumption, be alerted when there are potential problems, and receive relevant communications. Portal applications improve the customer experience.

This article describes why your utility should strongly consider implementing a customer portal solution. It also includes nine (9) ideas to help bolster your business case should you decide to deploy this type of technology.

Familiar Problems...Elevated Customer Demands

Increasing numbers of customer support calls. Customers expecting you to contact them before they receive a high bill or a damage-causing leak. Multiple, time-intensive steps you must take to notify delinquent accounts before they can be shutoff. These are examples of common problems that utility billing and customer service teams are dealing with every day.

These issues are of little surprise to the managers that lead these departments. But what might not be as well known, or as appreciated, is the power of consumer

engagement technologies to tackle and address these demands in innovative ways. What's even more exciting is that these technologies are affordable, understandable, and can be deployed with relative ease.

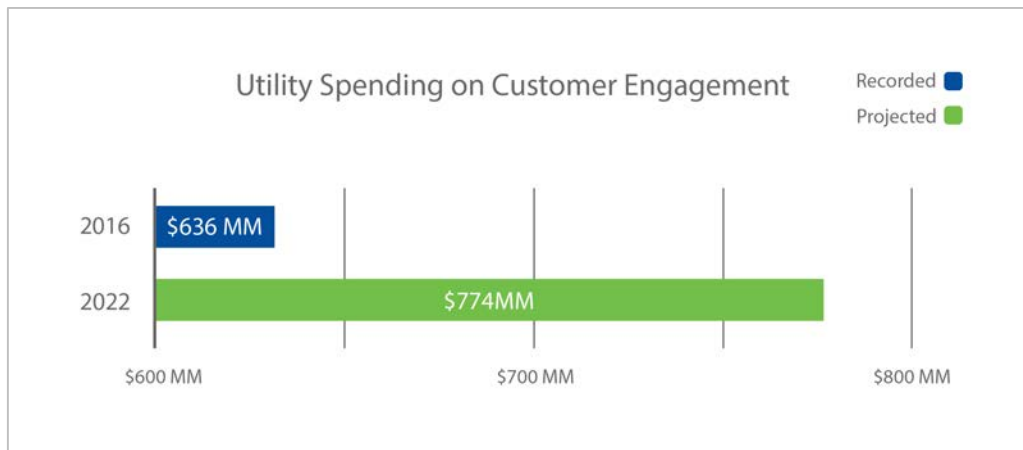
Multi-Channel Interactions

Utility customers desire to interact with their provider through multiple channels. Some customers want traditional access via telephone or office walk-ins. Others, who can be described as "power-users", want to do everything they can do on the phone or in person, on a 24x7 basis, via their smartphones, tablets and desktop computers.

You may be wondering why the needs of utility customers seem to be expanding at such a fast pace. One of the reasons is that they are being heavily influenced by other industries and the technology options they routinely offer.

As an example, almost every bank enables account holders to: see their balances online, pay bills, scan a check and make a deposit. They can accomplish all of these tasks using their cell phones and without ever seeing a teller. The ante has clearly been raised.





According to a recent report by Navigant Research, "Utility spending on customer engagement is expected to grow from \$636 million in 2016 to \$774 million in 2022." The company asserts that,

"Investing in self-service tools via the web or mobile applications can help reduce traffic to call centers, saving money in the long run."¹

These findings are supported by J.D. Power in its Residential Electric Utility Customer Satisfaction Study that found:

- "Website access is going mobile: More than one-third (35%) of customers are now accessing their utility's website either by a mobile phone or by a tablet, which is a 15% increase from 2016
- Electronic bill-pay is increasing: mail payments are down by 3% year over year (17% vs. 20%, respectively)."²

Even if you and your team agree that implementing a consumer engagement system is the right decision, your utility is already balancing competing priorities. To earn support, you'll need to make a business and financial case that demonstrates how a customer portal investment can generate a measurable return.

The following examples should help make your case. It's also important to recognize that an ancillary outcome of using a customer portal application is that the benefits are cumulative. The sooner you get started, the faster you accrue the rewards.



¹ Retrieved on 7.22.2017 from: <https://www.navigantresearch.com/newsroom/utility-spending-on-customer-engagement-is-expected-to-grow-from-636-million-in-2016-to-774-million-in-2022>

² Retrieved on 7.22.2017 from: <http://www.jdpower.com/press-releases/jd-power-2017-electric-utility-residential-customer-satisfaction-study>

Operational Efficiency Benefits

1. Manage Customer Support Calls More Quickly and Easily

Without a customer portal application, your team relies on its utility billing program or Customer Information System (CIS) to answer questions. If your organization has invested in a smart meter network or Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) system, you can also use the headend application or Meter Data Management System (MDMS) to troubleshoot customer problems.

A basic drawback of these systems is that they don't provide any visibility for customers to see their own information. When clients can follow along and see the data your staff is using to answer their questions, providing support is easier, faster, and more customer-inclusive.

2. Eliminate High Bill Complaint Calls

High bill complaint calls are a frequent problem that your billing and support teams are dealing with constantly. By providing a system that gives customers access to their consumption and billing information, if the bill is different than what they expected, they have tools to figure it out independently.

There are also advanced portal systems that work to eliminate these types of support calls altogether. "Threshold Alerting" is a function where the customer specifies an amount of money he/she doesn't want to exceed in a given billing period. If the person is trending to, or has exceeded that value, the system will alert her via text message, e-mail, or automated phone call.

Customers have a way to monitor their usage according to their own criteria. The utility benefits through a reduction in support calls and increased customer satisfaction.



3. Automating the Shutoff Notification Process

Almost every utility has a formal notification process they follow before suspending a customer's water service. These processes usually involve several communication steps and each must be completed according to a specific timeline.

Consumer engagement applications can automate many of these tasks, give utilities more control over the process, and even reduce the amount of time employees spend on this not-so-fun part of the job. Ultimately, providers can encourage more timely payments and reduce the number of times they have to roll a truck to perform a shutoff.

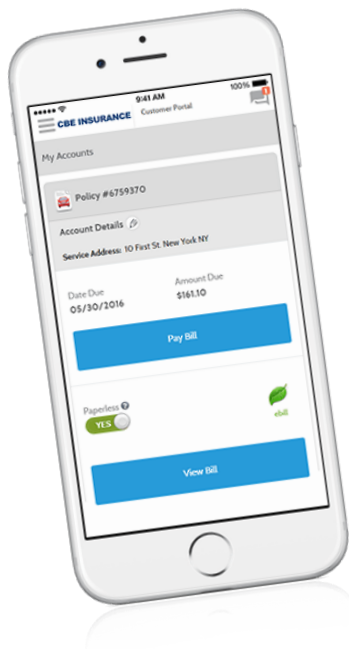
4. Targeted, Lower Cost Customer Communications

Portal solutions offer a set of tools for gathering contact information from customers and learning their communication preferences. Text, e-mail, phone call, and

"push messaging" via mobile apps allow utilities to communicate more frequently and in a targeted manner. If communications can be delivered efficiently and at reasonable costs, they offer tremendous advantages to utilities.

The J.D. Power 2017 Water Utility Residential Customer

Satisfaction Study noted that, "Frequent communication maximizes satisfaction: Customers who recall receiving six or more communications from their water utility have communications satisfaction scores that are 203 points higher than those who do not recall receiving any direct communications."³



Reducing Your Utility's Direct Expenses

5. Offering eBill and ePay Services Decreases Costs

Two of the most frequently used capabilities offered by a consumer engagement portal are electronic billing (eBill) and online payment (ePay) services. For every person who opts to receive an electronic bill, your utility doesn't have to print, fold, stuff, and mail a physical bill. These savings can equate to more than \$.65 per customer per billing cycle and they add up rapidly.

For every person who visits your portal and makes an online payment, your utility receives its money sooner, the transactions are easier to track, and you don't have to handle a physical check. In addition, ePay and eBill services offer notable savings in terms of staff time that couldn't be achieved without these online options.

eBill and ePay services give customers more flexibility and control.

Quantifiable Customer Benefits

In addition to cost savings and improvements in operational efficiency, consumer engagement solutions offer customers new and unique ways to interact with their providers.

6. Proactive Alerts and Notifications Drive Customer Satisfaction

Big data analytics is a much-hyped term that is showing up in all kinds of utility-related conferences, publications and websites.

³ Retrieved on 8.1.2017 from: <http://www.jdpower.com/press-releases/jd-power-2017-water-utility-residential-customer-satisfaction-study>



The purpose of big data analytics is to evaluate the large volumes of data that are generated by various systems--e.g., SCADA, AMI, AMR, work order management, etc.--and find ways for utilities to be more efficient, identify problems proactively, and save money.

While most consumer engagement solutions have some form of analytics working in the background, one area they are delivering on the big data hype relates to evaluating the meter reading data generated by AMI systems.

Advanced solutions can find issues such as abnormally high usage or water leaks before they become costly problems. When identification is combined with proactive notification, utilities will be delivering an elevated level of service that customers will recognize and appreciate.

7. Service Requests

Most portal applications offer an online way for customers to submit service requests and to start/stop service. Using online channels for these tasks makes it easier for customers and can minimize phone-based support calls.

8. Encouraging Conservation

It's common for utilities to offer different conservation initiatives such as rebates or educational programs. Some have enacted more stringent requirements like water budgets, water restrictions, or mandated conservation targets.

Encouraging customers to participate in voluntary conservation programs can be supported through a portal solution and targeted messaging. In the case where customers are required to conserve, the portal allows them to track their progress and ensure they meet compliance requirements.

9. Fulfill your AMI Promise

If your utility is seeking to install an AMI system, when you present your funding request to the service community, you'll most likely promise direct customer access to the usage data the smart meter network generates. If you've already implemented an AMI system, you probably made this commitment.

A consumer engagement portal lets you deliver on this promise in an affordable way.

Summary

A customer portal solution may be one of the best investments a utility can make. It's inherently designed to streamline utility operations, improve customer service, and build public trust.

It offers a means to reduce direct expenses by providing electronic billing and online payment services. It automates routine tasks that employees perform each day. It creates another channel for communication with customers about everything from potential leaks and unpaid bills, to service outages and conservation programs.

These applications expand consumer options. Users can see their consumption, receive a text message before they get a high bill, and log a service request from their phone or desktop computer. By providing self-service opportunities, your clients are empowered to solve their own problems.

Customer engagement systems are affordable, straightforward to install and use, and can be adapted to the unique needs of your utility. If they aren't already, they are rapidly becoming a core offering all utilities should provide.



About AquaHawk Software

AquaHawk™ is an affordable Web-based, customer portal solution that helps water utilities improve customer service and build stronger client relationships. By presenting useful data and actionable information, utility clients have more control over their water consumption and can save money.

Utility employees benefit through a reduction in support calls, easier resolution of high bill complaints, and improved operational efficiencies.

To learn more, visit our website at: www.AquaHawk.com. Be sure to request an online demonstration!

