

Analysis

Empowering the people

In the first of a series of case studies on leaders in customer engagement, Sam Fuller at UK Power Networks talks to Denise Chevin about rapid omni-channel scale up, a new sign language service and ‘what3words’.



UK Power Networks is not only the biggest distribution network operator (DNO) in the country, it also serves a wide diversity of communities. At the same time, with no direct billing relationship, 80 per cent of engagement with customers occurs only when there is a power outage. “Luckily that’s not very often as our network is 99.9 per cent resilient” says Sam Fuller, head of customer services at UK Power Networks. “But because we only engage with them rarely, we have to make sure that when we do it’s first class.”

With 8.3 million connected homes across London, the South East and the East of England, that means providing choice and allowing customers to engage by whatever means they decide. It also means being fleet of foot, with the ability to scale up at a moment’s notice should the worst happen.

In terms of accessibility, it’s about ensuring that whatever channel customers choose, they get the same level of service and the same information. “It would be very simple to drive everything towards self-service and never speak to a human, but we’ve found that because we have such diverse communities, there are different needs across them,” says Fuller.

“If there’s a big power outage in London, we find our social media channels get very busy. Lots of customers migrate to that channel; it’s their channel of choice. Whereas

in East England, in some of the more rural and coastal areas, we see much more telephone traffic.

“So we have to be agile, and offer customers that choice, not push them down the route that suits us, or is the most efficient for us. We also provide consistency of information across all the channels. So for example when a power outage happens, we have a summary message that is used for our website, for our messaging, and for our social media team.”

Fuller joined UK Power Networks just over six-and-a-half years ago from a senior role at Barclays, which he says was focused on customer service and bringing in innovative approaches. He’s brought that mindset to UK Power Networks and helped the company earn a consistently high ranking in Ofgem’s annual table for stakeholder engagement.

UK Power Networks has one main contact centre where it has centralised its teams and multi-skilled them, but during weather events when it gets busier it can scale up quickly. “If you look at the lightning strikes that happened in the summer, you go very rapidly from an average day where we might get around 2,500 calls to nearer 12,000,” explains Fuller.

“We have 900 support staff who may work in departments like HR and procurement that we can call on to create six mini-contact centres in emergencies. But we also plan

for how the engagement might ramp up. If we see it’s going to be busy in London, for example, we upscale in a slightly different way and anticipate social media being especially busy.”

Fuller says text message is still the most popular channel, together with online. “Over time we are seeing telephone traffic being reduced, and that’s a combination of innovating through new channels and being open and transparent. A big part of it is also about cutting down on repeat callers, which is about first time resolution.

“If we focus on getting things right the first time, the benefit in terms of satisfaction and resourcing is tenfold.”

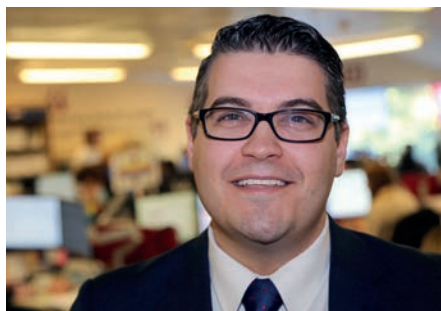
Allowing all staff to see customer engagement history as a “golden thread of information” means it is easier to get first-time resolution. UK Power Networks has worked closely with Content Guru over the past ten years to develop an omni-channel engagement platform in a genuinely partnership approach (see box, below).

“The fact that we have our information absolutely joined up means that when we measure things like repeat callers and customer satisfaction, we’re delighted by what we see. The effort that we’ve put into that golden thread, that consistency of information, really comes through.”

The right partner

For over a decade, UK Power Networks has worked with cloud communications provider Content Guru to transform its customer communications. The partnership has deployed 30 services, creating a cutting-edge omni-channel estate within the storm® platform and powering enhanced customer engagement for approximately 19 million customers.

Working with Content Guru has allowed UK Power Networks’ entire communications estate to be co-designed, creating a bespoke service made in-line with the company’s requirements. storm was integrated with ENMAC, UK Power Networks’ electricity monitoring system, to feed real-time data into services; customers can now navigate over-the-phone to access automated voice prompts with up-to-date infor-



Q&A

Sam Fuller, UK Power Networks

Do you always respond to social media, even when negative?

We're really proud of our social media, and we're proud to be leading the way with response times. Our response time across all channels – 24/7 – is under four minutes. But we've also developed proactive searches. So, for example, on social media if someone were to write "power outage, London", they might not have done that on our channels, or used our hashtags, but if we can find them proactively. It will be delivered to our agents, and they'll go back out to that customer and say: "Oh by the way, we're UK Power Networks, here's some information for you." It's about anticipating need, that's the point.

Do you use chatbots?

No. We have explored that, and it's something we'd look at for giving us scalability in some of our busier times, but currently everything we do is a human responding.

What are you doing to improve engagement with vulnerable customers?

When I joined in 2012, we had 300,000 cus-

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We put all of our teams and customer-facing staff through "sensory training", which we've developed with a number of charities. In the training, staff wear glasses that simulate different eye conditions, or wear gloves that simulate arthritis, or put on boots that simulate movement trouble perhaps. And we then say: "Now, try and use our services." Because that's the experience that some of our customers go through. It helps our staff develop empathy and understanding of the different needs of our customers.

That approach is how we now look at all new development services. Engaging with deaf customers through British sign language is another great example. We talk a lot about being an inclusive service, and we're proud that we've got the BSI inclusivity standard award, but we asked ourselves: "What does that really mean for groups such as the deaf and hard of hearing?"

When we looked at that group, and worked with some specialist organisations in that community, we found that they don't speak standard English. British sign language and standard English are not the same language. So we have partnered with leading British sign language interpreter providers Sign Live and Interpreter Now, where customers can opt for Facetime, in effect, through an interpreter, so they can converse using British sign language. The interpreter then liaises with our team.

What are the big challenges?

One of our three visions is about staying cost efficient, which means being the lowest cost network operator in the UK. On average, it's just over £75 a year per domestic bill.

One of the biggest challenges is balancing the need to continue to offer value, be agile and get things live, but making sure what you do provide enhances your service, and doesn't detract from it.

To help us do this we put in place, three years ago now, a customer group that helps us co-design new product services and solutions. And we've got just over 500 customers on that now. That help us. That challenges us.

Last year we developed a new fault map where customers could track their power cut. It's taking what we all use on a daily basis with delivery companies, where you track your package, and then asking ourselves, how do we take that concept and

allow customers to track their power cut and understand the stages we go through.

When we first developed this solution with customers, we tested the satisfaction scores and we got just over 7 out of 10. We're very clear that unless something delivers a 9 out of 10, we do not put it live. And although that means going back to the drawing board sometimes, we take our time and we do it properly. We went through four different iterations before customers scored it just over 9, and then we put it live.

What is the next big thing for you?

You hear a lot around AI and natural language and we are looking at those things, but again we have to look at how these services fit what we do, and sit within our industry. For example, we wouldn't necessarily be looking at investing in smart speakers in homes, because in a power outage, those things aren't going to work.

We've just become the first electricity company in the UK to put live what3words, an app developed by a UK organisation who've mapped every single point across the world on a 3m x 3m grid. And each of 3m squared grids across the world have three words associated with them. So that could be "future, human, foster", for example.

You can then put those three words into this solution, and it gives you the exact location of where that is on the globe. In an extreme weather event, we might get a call from somebody who is driving along and will say "I can see that a line has come down, in a field," and we then start going through the process of finding out where they are.

That's a really difficult challenge. We're trying to move at speed, because public safety is obviously a priority, but when we're trying to locate them, all of that takes time. So what we've been able to do with this new solution is we can instantly send the customer a text saying 'please click on this,' and by clicking on it, it gives us three words, we can then put that in our solution, and we know exactly where they are. This is a real innovation that will help keep customers safe, and also enable us to keep our network working.

Our customer engagement report can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/2PcztAL>

Utility Week's customer engagement series is supported by Content Guru.

