E Source completes utility industry's first omnichannel study

Results reveal importance of giving customers options for interacting with their utility
By Kym Wootton
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E Source recently released findings from its industry-first Omnichannel Survey. By gathering omnichannel data from 51 electric and natural gas utilities in the US and Canada, as well as insights from more than 800 residential utility customers, E Source illuminated the gaps between customer and utility perceptions of omnichannel experiences across eight customer-facing channels. This comprehensive study focused on interactions via utility websites, email, phone (live agent and interactive voice response system), social media, online chat, text message, and mobile app.

"Utilities are beginning to pay close attention to the experiences customers are having with all service providers, and they're layering those expectations into their channel-integration strategy," says Tia Hensler Heath, vice president of Research at E Source.

The study revealed that residential customers and utilities agree on the high importance of omnichannel experience indicators such as consistency, seamlessness, preferences, and integration. However, customer preferences differ by age and will likely evolve as newer channels such as online chat emerge. This finding highlights the importance of giving customers a choice in how they interact with their utility and making sure each channel meets customer expectations.

In addition, customers expect to quickly resolve their issue when using more than one channel to contact the utility. Properly addressing customers' needs the first time they interact with a company—also called first-contact resolution—gives customers a positive impression of the quality of service they receive. Over the course of the study, E Source found that online chat, although rated lower in importance by customers, ranked second out of eight channels in terms of first-contact resolution and third for quality of service received.

To improve the customer experience across channels, E Source recommends that utilities review existing channel offerings and make adjustments to align them with voice-of-the-customer feedback. Utilities should also consider updating their customer preference centers to allow for additional channels, expanding and clarifying operational hours to better align with customer expectations, and guiding customers toward the most effective channel for a given situation.

About E Source

For 26 years, E Source has been providing research, consulting, and market research to more than 300 utilities and their partners. This guidance helps our customers advance their efficiency programs, enhance customer relationships, and use energy more efficiently.

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