Is your utility ready for coronavirus?

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March 12, 2020

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We've all gotten good advice on how to control COVID-19 in our personal lives—wash your hands, stay home if you're sick, limit your travel—but what should utilities do? How should you prepare for the effects of coronavirus on your utility contact center, your utility credit and collections policies, and your external communications?

Utilities are now communicating widely about the virus (**figure 1**). In addition to publishing their corporate press releases, they're talking about their plans to:

- Maintain customers' power and water service without disruption or disconnection
- Keep their employees, communities, and customers safe and healthy
- Forgive late payments and nonpayments for a period of time

Figure 1: Utilities are taking to social media to communicate their plans for COVID-19

Use your social media channels to assure customers that you're taking steps to keep them and your employees healthy. Tell them that their power will stay on and their payments will be deferred. Some utilities are even warning customers to be on the lookout for scammers.

Detroit Water & Sewerage Department

> Beginning Wednesday, March 18, DWSD Customer Care Centers, to protect the safety of our employees and customers, we will only conduct new service activations and cash payments ONLY requiring change at the centers....(1/2) pic.twitter.com/N3sXLPROXp
>
> — Detroit Water DWSD (@DetroitWaterDep) March 17, 2020

Pacific Power

Sacramento Municipal Utility District

Hawaiian Electric Co.

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It’s better to be safe than sorry. While there are no confirmed cases of COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019), we are taking several actions to protect our employees and keep the lights on if COVID-19 impacts Hawaii: • We have a working group that is if finalizing emergency plans for disease outbreak situations. The team has also been sending us reminders about proper hygiene to avoid the spread of germs. Business travel restrictions are now in place for our employees. Any business trips to Asia, Italy and Iran have been canceled or postponed. Representatives from our company helped staff the Hawaii State Emergency Management Agency joint information center at the state Department of Health (DOH) where they monitored social media for inaccurate information or false rumors, among other duties. • The public must also be aware of scammers who are using the COVID-19 situation to develop new ways to obtain personal and financial information. We all need to be vigilant and never trust information or accept requests coming from an unknown source. • Scammers have been: Selling and falsely advertising inefficient or fake products (masks, treatments, etc.) Sending phishing emails, texts, and social media posts Requesting donations to help fictitious organizations Promising critical information about cases in the community in exchange for personal/financial information. • Don’t panic or become a victim. It’s important to remain calm, but at the same time be prepared for emergencies of any kind. For more information, read our latest blog post at medium.com/@PoweringHawaii. • #hawaiianelectric #covid19 #covid #coronavirus #hawaii #scamprotection #fraudprevention #stayalert #cdc #who #doh #disease #coronavirus2019 #departmentofhealth #centersfordiseasecontrolandprevention #worldhealthorganization #pandemic @who @cdcgov

A post shared by Hawaiian Electric (@hawaiianelectric) on Mar 2, 2020 at 10:31am PST

Your customers want to know what to expect from you if their community gets sick. Your employees want to know what to do to prepare for potential impacts. Google Trends reports that the top five questions related to coronavirus in the past week were:

- How did the coronavirus start?
- What is the coronavirus?
- How many cases of coronavirus in the US?
- How long does coronavirus last?
- How many people have died from coronavirus?

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You’re used to helping people prepare for disasters such as hurricanes, fires, and earthquakes. And you’ve seen improvements in customer satisfaction when you manage these communications well. Coronavirus is no different. Alleviate your customers’ worries and have at the ready answers to their

most critical questions, such as:

- What can I do to control my energy bill if I have to spend more time at home?
- How is my utility making sure that hospitals in the area won't lose power during an outage?
- How can I afford my bill if I can't work due to a coronavirus outbreak in my community?

You also need to consider how an outbreak will impact your internal operations.

What effects might a coronavirus infection have on your call center? Your contact center employees need to know how to react to increased absenteeism, changes in call volume, and strains on limited resources. How will your pared-down staff process ramped-up customer requests?

What shake-ups might occur to your credit and collections processes? Credit and collections will get messy if the customers who are most likely to be energy insecure are the most likely to be affected by the virus.

How will you communicate about COVID-19 and your utility's operations? Customers will want to know that you're coordinating with local health officials to ensure safe, reliable power.

About E Source

E Source partners with utilities and cities to help them reduce costs, evolve their technologies, increase customer satisfaction, and create programs that make an impact. We're a solutions-based consulting, research and advisory, and data science firm that's committed to a sustainable energy future.

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