What can we learn from utility social media during the Texas and Midwest outages?

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February 22, 2021

What can we learn from utility social media during the Texas and Midwest outages?

The mid-February weather in many parts of the US has been one for the record books. Weather channels are using terms such as “polar vortex” and “arctic blast,” and utility customers in the central US, especially Texas, and the Midwest are struggling with power outages and water problems.

Utilities are using social media to deliver news about planned and unplanned service interruptions. The successful energy and water companies are talking to customers in a sensitive, people-first way. They’re posting social content related to:

- The location of outages and what the utility is doing to restore power and water
- The rationale behind blackouts and rotating service interruptions; their impact on customers; and when they might stop
- Requests for customers to voluntarily reduce their energy and water use to help get the utilities back on faster
- Expressions of thanks to customers for their patience
- Info on staying safe during winter outages
- Warnings to stay away from downed power lines and guidance for reporting them

Our report The essentials for communicating unplanned and planned outages (available to members of the E Source Corporate Communications Service) explains that while it’s important to provide an estimated time of restoration, customers are more satisfied if they get a steady stream of updates. Customers also respond positively to photos of your crews working hard to restore power as well as images of the extensive damage to utility infrastructure.

Say you’re sorry

If your equipment failed or you miscalculated a recovery time, apologize. Follow our 5 steps to crafting an apology that builds customer loyalty to take responsibility and regain customer trust.

Even if you do everything right in your messaging—such as using empathy and providing proactive updates—customers may still be upset and lash out in the comments sections of your posts. These people are looking for someone to blame and your utility is an easy target. Our advice: stay the course. Continue posting empathetic message and giving updates. In your responses, include these four elements:

- A thank-you
- An expression of concern
- Some marketing
- An invitation to take the conversation off-line

For more advice, read our report Addressing negativity on social media, which is also available to E Source Corporate Communications Service members.

We've gathered some sample posts from utilities during this chaotic and painful time to inspire your own outage communication efforts (**figure 1**). We recommend visiting these utilities' social media channels to see more examples of the types of posts they're sharing as well as how often they're posting. And watch our interviews with Sabrina Potirala, manager of digital business at ComEd, and Rebecca Sheperd, senior emergency preparedness administrator at ComEd, after their Braving the storm: Emergency communications in a changing world session at E Source Forum 2019. Learn how their utility talked to customers during the January 2019 polar vortex that brought some of the coldest temperatures Chicago had ever seen.

Figure 1: Utilities in Texas and the Midwest US provide information via Twitter and Facebook related to extreme-weather-caused outages

We gathered example posts from AEP Texas, Austin Energy, Austin Water, CenterPoint Energy, CPS Energy, LES, Liberty Utilities, Nebraska Public Power District, Omaha Public Power District, and Oncor.

AEP Texas

Austin Energy

> ROTATING OUTAGE UPDATE: Due to the severity of weather and the condition of the @ERCOT_ISO grid, rotating outages in the Austin Energy area are lasting longer than the expected 40 minutes.
> Please continue to conserve energy.
> How rotating outages work: https://t.co/fxc16JZo6H pic.twitter.com/xyTwCrehIt
>
> — Austin Energy (@austinenergy) February 15, 2021

Austin Water

> Our crews are continuing repairs and we are still making headway on restoring water in our storage tanks. As the system stabilizes, your water pressure will come back, first low, then returning to normal. You may begin using the water immediately, even at low pressure. pic.twitter.com/D1C2zgylmY
>
> — Austin Water (@AustinWater) February 20, 2021

CenterPoint Energy

CPS Energy

LES

Liberty Utilities

> OUTAGE UPDATE – 11:00 a.m. February 16, 2021: We currently have approximately 10,711 customers without power. We just received word from SPP that we can halt controlled service interruptions at this time. However, we urge customers to be prepared. #peakalert (1/4)
>
> — Liberty - Central Region (@PlugIntoLiberty) February 16, 2021

Nebraska Public Power District

> PLEASE NOTE, we are likely to see outages again tonight and possibly into tomorrow. So please plan for possible outages lasting 45 minutes. Please continue to take all reasonable steps to conserve energy use. We will continue to provide updates as conditions evolve.
>
> — NPPD (@NPPDnews) February 16, 2021

Omaha Public Power District

Oncor

> EMERGENCY UPDATE: We recognize the hardships and extreme frustration customers without power face during these historical low temperatures and are ready to deliver power as soon as electric generators are able to provide it.
>
> — Oncor (@oncor) February 16, 2021

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