COVID, one year later: Celebrating utilities' efforts to help customers

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As we make our way through March 2021, many of us feel shocked to find that it has been a full year since the US started issuing stay-at-home orders. As we reflect on the past 12 months, much of what we think of has a negative connotation: being stuck in our homes, cancelled events and gatherings, restrictions on visiting friends and family, and the worry of contracting and spreading the virus.

But weaved throughout the struggles of the year are successes worth celebrating. Utilities worked incredibly hard to help customers, contribute to COVID-19 relief efforts, and essentially become a reliable (and possibly unexpected) source of support in a trying time.

We'd like to recognize the efforts and achievements of the utility sector as an appreciation for everything they've done for us.

Social media outreach

There are many ways to connect with utility customers, but one method of communication that saw a big boost in 2020 was social media. Many utilities used social media to supply customers with coronavirus information, especially as many customers struggled with furloughs and income challenges.

In a previous blog post, Is your utility ready for coronavirus?, we highlighted how utilities were using social media to communicate their COVID plans. We featured great examples from the Detroit Water & Sewage Department, Pacific Power, and Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) (**figure 1**).

Figure 1: Special COVID-19 alert from SMUD

SMUD used its social media channels, including Facebook, to keep customers informed and up to date on the utility's COVID-related plans.

As the pandemic progressed throughout the year, research and emergency care facilities struggled to keep up. It was truly amazing and inspiring to see utilities donating to the cause. Utilities such as PG&E

donated over 1 million masks to local hospitals. Other utilities, including Duke Energy, Dominion Energy, RG&E, and Southern Company, made significant monetary donations to coronavirus relief efforts. We kept our Utility responses to the COVID-19 pandemic spreadsheet up to date throughout the year to monitor utilities' philanthropic actions.

Financial help for customers

Providing financial assistance to customers was the most visible and arguably the best way utilities provided relief. Not only did utilities such as Austin Energy, Central Maine Power, Cascade Natural Gas, and many more suspend all utility disconnects for nonpayment, they also waived a variety of fees to help lift the burden of monthly bills.

Another major way utilities helped customers save money during the pandemic came in the form of energy audits. Many customers were suddenly working from their homes and saw their energy bills go up as they used far more energy than usual. To provide some relief, Mass Save and others offered virtual home energy assessments (**figure 2**). This allowed energy auditors to analyze customers' homes via webcam or smartphone camera and offer energy-saving tips. The utility could then ship the customer a personalized kit of free products like LED bulbs and smart power strips.

Figure 2: Mass Save's virtual home energy audit promotion

Mass Save used Twitter to encourage customers to sign up for a no-cost home energy assessment during the pandemic.

> Reduce energy consumption and increase comfort while staying safe. Try a Virtual Home Energy Assessment. Learn more here: https://t.co/8ZjvS9VZKU#homeenergy #energysavings pic.twitter.com/8bAZ1Q0MRx
>
> — Mass Save (@MassSave) May 21, 2020

A few utilities also provided greatly discounted or free products via their online marketplaces to help with rising bills in the warmer months. One Massachusetts utility offered $25 smart thermostats. New Jersey Natural Gas (NJNG) partnered with Google to offer a free Nest thermostat to eligible New Jersey residents (**figure 3**).

Figure 3: NJNG's smart thermostat Twitter promotion

During the summer of 2020, NJNG offered customers a free smart thermostat to help with rising cooling bills.

> During hot #NJsummer months, smart thermostats can learn your cooling habits & adjust your home's temperature. NJNG customers can get a free Google Nest Thermostat E until 7/20*. Click to get yours today at https://t.co/jpPX4G65w7. *Terms/conditions apply. #SummerHeat #summer pic.twitter.com/zxGcXYVyj9

— NJ Natural Gas (@NJNaturalGas) June 24, 2020

If 2021 proved anything, it’s that when a crisis hits, we must come together as a united front. It’s been a difficult time that continues to challenge us, but we’re inspired by utilities that are doing everything they can to support and help their customers. Thank you, utilities!

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