How COVID reshaped social media for utilities

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As the world began to shut down in early spring 2020, no one was prepared for how to manage, let alone communicate about, what was to come. Utility social media managers could pull from their experience as crisis communicators during emergencies and storms, but they didn't have a script for communicating to customers about a yearlong global pandemic.

But they figured it out. Their regularly scheduled social media posts soon evolved into a steady beat of "we're here for you" messages, updates on disconnection moratoriums, and info about special payment programs for those in need of financial assistance.

Need help with social media strategy?

We discussed these topics and more at the Spring 2021 E Source Social Media Leadership Council. Members of the E Source Residential Marketing Service, Business Marketing Service, or Corporate Communications Service can access the event presentations and recordings. Not subscribed to those services? Contact us to learn more about the benefits of subscribing.

Even as the number of people vaccinated in the US grows each day, it's becoming clear that there's no going back to the way we were. Customer needs and preferences have been forever changed. It's up to utilities to rise to this new challenge and meet customers where they are.

Take a look at a few ways the pandemic has reshaped the social media landscape for utilities.

Less is more: Be strategic with content

As Zoom fatigue became a reality, utilities soon discovered that content fatigue was also a new ailment to add to an ever-growing list of pandemic woes. Our lives became more virtual, and the clutter of content became more noticeable. Many of our utility members reported that customers no longer had the same appetite for evergreen content that they once did. Engagement fell on these kinds of posts, demonstrating that customers just weren't seeing the value. Scale back the "fluff" posts and prioritize the information customers need to know.

Keep the negativity in perspective

COVID-19 caused stress for everyone. If there's ever a good place to let off some steam, it's on your utility's social media page. Utilities have reported seeing a notable increase in negative sentiment during the pandemic. But according to the 2021 E Source COVID-19 Residential Survey, overall customer satisfaction increased during the pandemic with 77% of US and Canada electric utility customers and 80% of natural gas customers rating their utility as good or excellent. The study also found that household income affects customer satisfaction.

If your utility has seen a spike in negativity on social media, it might be the voice of a smaller subset of customers who have been hit especially hard by the pandemic. Think about ways you can better reach these customers to make sure they're taking advantage of your special programs.

Discover new frontiers

The pandemic offered the perfect opportunity to try new things, whether by choice or by necessity. Many utilities experimented with new engagement strategies, such as Facebook Live events and augmented-reality experiences. There's also an ever-growing list of platforms to consider. TikTok, Clubhouse, and NextDoor present new avenues for utilities to connect with customers.

While these strategies and platforms can be exciting, we recommend them only to utilities that have mastered the basics. If expanding your social media presence will stretch your team too thin, it's not worth it. It's also important to consider if the new platforms align with your goals. Are you looking to sell energy efficiency to a younger audience? Then TikTok might just be the place for you!

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