Equity and the utility customer: Highlights from 2023 customer survey findings

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Equity is at the nexus of the relationship between customers living in frontline communities and their local utility. And findings from two of our E Source Affordability and Equity annual surveys emphasized that point. The surveys aimed to probe further into what frontline customers and communities need and want from their relationship with their utility and investments in clean energy.

Equity and the utility customer: Findings from 2023 surveys

Dive into recent survey results and what they might mean for utilities and their efforts to improve affordability and equity.

View webinar

Our research was conducted online among 1,035 adults (age 18 or older) with an annual income per household of less than $50,000. We ran the study from September 29 to October 3, 2023. We found survey responses to be more nuanced and layered on questions of fairness and equity. But there is more work to be done on the part of the utilities to fulfill the promise of equity in these communities.

These are some themes that stood out to us overall:

- *Community.* Customers care deeply about what happens in their communities and would like to be involved in decisions that affect their communities.
- *The past and the future.* Transitioning to a clean energy economy also means reckoning with past decisions, including the planning for and siting of utility investments.
- *Health and justice.* Utilities are at the center of driving many clean energy investments and playing a vital role in the economy of the communities they serve, leaving them in a unique position to help drive larger outcomes to improve the health and well-being of these communities.

To see all of the survey results and more insights, we welcome you to watch our on-demand webinar

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How well do utilities incorporate community input?

Utilities need to make sure that their community is represented when making decisions or investments that directly impact the community. We asked the participants to rate how well their local utility incorporates their input into their decision-making.

How well the utility incorporates community input

There were notable differences in satisfaction levels based on income brackets, with lower-income customers generally giving higher marks.

We found that around 27% of respondents felt utilities were proactive in involving community input, 26% were neutral, and about 20% felt utilities didn't do a good job. Interestingly, 40% of the Black community felt more aligned with utility efforts in their communities compared to others.

Utilities that compensate participating customers will almost always receive more participation.

We also inquired about whether community members would be interested in volunteering for utility citizen advisory groups to help guide utility decision-making. While younger generations appeared more interested in getting involved, older generations were less likely to engage. However, when asked about interest in volunteering for a group with compensation, interest shot up dramatically.

This confirms the importance of customers being valued for their time. If able to do so, utilities that compensate participating customers will almost always receive more participation.

How important is it that utilities employ a diverse and inclusive workforce?

When asked how important it was that utility employees make up a diverse and inclusive workforce, over half of the respondents deemed that to be important.

Importance that the local utility employs a diverse and inclusive workforce

Respondents in the African American racial group had a noticeably higher ranking for the importance of hiring a diverse workforce.

Most respondents believe that there's a connection between a utility's workforce and what they're doing around clean energy and operations at large. A utility's team should reflect the community itself.

Is it the utility's responsibility to do its part in addressing larger issues like equity, social justice, and poverty?

We wanted to know quite bluntly what survey takers believed when it came to a utility's responsibility to do their part in addressing larger issues like equity, social justice, and poverty.

Utilities' responsibility to address issues like equity, social justice, and poverty

Responses to this question were more similar across respondent categories.

About 40% replied that utilities have a responsibility for equity in social justice. From the customer perspective, it's clear that utilities can't avoid having a larger role in these important issues.

How satisfied are you with your local gas or electricity utility's efforts in addressing larger issues like equity, social justice, and poverty?

When it comes to how satisfied customers are with the level of effort their utility is making in addressing these societal issues, participants seemed to perceive their utilities positively. Around 30% expressed high satisfaction and another 50% were somewhat satisfied.

Satisfaction level with utilities addressing issues like equity, social justice, and poverty

Results varied for this question, but it's clear there is still some work to be done with utilities doing their part to address social issues.

What we've learned from these insights

A utility's unique presence in communities can help drive positive outcomes and improve customer perception.

Utilities can enhance customer satisfaction and community impact by involving customers early in decision-making processes, offering opportunities for involvement, and compensating them for their time.

Despite a generally negative or indifferent view of utilities' impact on social issues, a utility's unique presence in communities can help drive positive outcomes and improve customer perception. Programs and services should be holistic—considering factors like pollution, health, social justice, clean energy, and community feedback—to assess success and address customer concerns effectively.

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