

Best Practice in communicating with customers – Seminar on 26 September 2006

Background

Ofgem is currently undertaking a review of existing supply licence obligations. As part of that work we published a consultation paper in March 2006 which sought views on a number of obligations which are of particular importance to vulnerable customers. As part of the consultation exercise we also held some seminars for interested stakeholders to meet with us and discuss the proposals. A number of respondents commented on the need for suppliers to take proper account of the communication needs of various groups of vulnerable customers and to do more to achieve best practice in their communications.

Ofgem remains committed to self-regulation where appropriate, and has identified the promotion of best practice as a theme in our Social Action Strategy. We decided that it would be helpful to host this seminar, to provide an opportunity for us all to understand how we can make further improvements to the ways in which we communicate.

On 26 September 2006, Ofgem hosted a best practice seminar on meeting the varying communication needs of customers with the aim of providing useful and practical advice to energy suppliers and others on how to better meet the communication needs of certain groups of customers.

A number of specialist organisations who have day to day experience of dealing with particular groups were invited to make presentations to suppliers, network operators and other interested parties, setting out their views on how to best meet the needs of these groups. Particular focus was given to customers with sensory impairment or learning disabilities and those who are elderly. Some issues were also raised relating to language barriers for customers whose first language is not English. Presentations were made by:

- ◆ Jill Eddlestone, Clear Consultants (presenting on behalf of Mencap)
- ◆ Siobonne Brewster, RNIB
- ◆ Georgette Vale, Deafblind
- ◆ Katie Bensted, Help the Aged

In addition the Energy Retail Association (ERA) and E.on UK (who supplies electricity and gas to customers under the Powergen brand) provided an industry perspective at the start of the seminar. All the presentations from the seminar are attached.

Key issues

Identifying that a customer has specific communication needs can be difficult

- Identification of requirements over the telephone was recognised as being particularly difficult and there was a general consensus that this was an area where suppliers could usefully work together, perhaps through the ERA, to share expertise and to develop common protocols

for call centre staff to help them identify particular communication needs. **The ERA and suppliers undertook to give further thought to the possibility of developing a common protocol amongst suppliers**

- Dual sensory impairment was also highlighted as being a particular issue for network operators – who need to inform customers about loss of supply incidents (both planned and unplanned). The use of local authority data on persons with dual sensory impairment living within their area could provide a useful tool to help ensure customers were told of the loss of supply in the appropriate manner. **Ofgem undertook to explore this issue further.**
- Partnership working was recognised as an important tool in linking suppliers with groups of customers with particular communication needs as well as in providing guidance and training. There were many good examples of such work today although there was clearly room to expand its use.
- Identifying specific needs could be addressed more directly when suppliers are taking on new customers: explaining to new customers why it is important to know about any specific communication needs and ensuring that any such details are logged may help to overcome any reluctance the customer may have to disclose such information to their new supplier. This could possibly be achieved through use of the PSR flag on suppliers' databases. It is also important for staff to speak clearly and with compassion at all times when dealing with customers.

The cost of providing a full range of communication tools to meet the potential communication needs of all customers can be significant

- A key theme emerging from the seminar was that in many instances the special communication needs of customers could be met by making everyday communications more accessible. Such an approach would help suppliers to overcome problems identifying these customers and might also help reduce costs as they would not need to send targeted communications to these customers.
- Key areas where suppliers and network operators could seek to make their general communications more accessible to different customer groups included:
 1. Using pictures and symbols wherever possible to help with clarification of information
 2. Avoiding complex language and words with multiple meanings
 3. Taking care to ensure that the formatting of communications is user friendly.
 4. Avoiding the use of pictures or colours as a background or the use of glossy paper all of which are likely to affect concentration and impair the ability of the customer to absorb the information.
 5. Using larger font sizes to help customers with visual impairments.
- Existing communication tools may also help to deliver a valuable service to certain customer groups with little or no additional costs.

For example, providing customers who have a hearing impairment with details of a fax number or email address on which they can contact you.

- In some instances it was clear that specific targeted communications would be necessary, ranging from the availability of Braille documentation, to interpreters and people trained in sign language to providing a minicom service. Adjusting existing communications to make them accessible to a larger number of customers would allow companies to better focus their time, expertise and resources on addressing the needs of these remaining customers.
- Cost of producing numerous versions of a communication in different languages may raise concerns. However there are cost effective and simpler ways to help make important communications more inclusive for customers whose first language is not English. For example by inserting flyers into important communications which explain in many different languages that the information is important and that full translations are available on request. This approach is adopted by some local authorities.

Summary of presentations and discussion at the seminar

ERA Presentation

The ERA provided an overview of the scale and particular challenges for the energy sector in communicating with customers who have specific communication needs.

The ERA highlighted the particular challenges for the energy sector, and the ways in which it can define and identify vulnerable customers. These included relying on Government definitions but also relying on judgement by the supplier to identify a vulnerable customer during any contact with them.

E.on Presentation

The different formats and level of information sent to customers was discussed, and it was agreed that a number of different formats should be adopted by energy suppliers to include all aspects of possible vulnerability. This is an issue which should be addressed by call centre staff when identifying customers' needs, and by consulting appropriate organisations. This is an area of work where all energy suppliers (through the ERA) could work together with other agencies, and one which should not raise any issues of confidentiality or of a competitive nature. Such an approach could deliver real benefits for suppliers and customers.

Generally it was considered that customers with specific needs should be referred to a dedicated team which can provide appropriate support. E.on confirmed that their literature includes a contact number dedicated for special assistance for customers (Caring Energy), and that similar schemes are run by other suppliers.

Mencap Presentation

A presentation was provided on behalf of Mencap by learning disability consultants - Clear Consultants.

Clear highlighted the fact that 1 in 6 of the general population has a reading difficulty, and that one of the best ways to deliver targeted help is to make everyday communication simpler to understand reducing the amount of information provided and ensuring that the information is provided in a clear format. Another issue to take into consideration was that most information is written - other forms of communication may be preferable and should be considered.

Clear confirmed that most people could not understand jargon and difficult words, and that companies should try to avoid using words that have multiple meanings. Sentences should have no more than 20 words with a maximum of 15 words when producing literature specifically for people with learning disabilities. Many people with learning disabilities also have problems with hearing and sight, and therefore the use of pictures and large print should be considered.

Mencap was responsible for the "Make it Clear" campaign which aimed to encourage organisations and public services to provide information in an easy read format. Questionnaires were filled in by people with learning disabilities identifying organisations that send out information that is difficult to understand. 4 out of 10 respondents said information from utility companies was difficult to understand. When questioned about whether people had problems with money or felt that they missed out on benefits etc, 6 out of 10 respondents confirmed that they had. A key factor here was the complexity of the issues and literature available to them. The questionnaire also revealed some of the key issues that made information difficult to understand. These were the use of jargon, long and difficult sentences, bad layout and the use of unclear pictures.

Clear confirmed that the five main things companies could do to improve the clarity of the information they provide were:

1. Make greater use of pictures – where they add to explanation and tell a clear story
2. Use easy words and sentences
3. Keep it simple and don't include too much information
4. Use a clear layout – good font sizes, clear colours etc
5. Offer tapes which explain key pieces of information.

RNIB Presentation

RNIB provided an overview of the information that energy suppliers may want to convey to their customers, and how this is currently delivered. Following on from this, RNIB highlighted the ways in which information could be delivered to blind and partially sighted people. This included disability awareness training for suppliers' call centre staff, and also similar training on home visits.

In order to help ensure that customers can access the information that suppliers provide, RNIB considered that information should be provided in the following formats:

- ◆ Clear print and large print
- ◆ Braille
- ◆ Audio Tape and CD-Rom
- ◆ Signs
- ◆ E Text and Websites
- ◆ Video.

RNIB suggested that suppliers should look to produce the following key documents in accessible formats:

- ◆ Letters, bills and statements
- ◆ Contracts
- ◆ Information/Marketing details
- ◆ ID Cards
- ◆ Website – Intranet and Internet

RNIB provided an overview of Braille, and highlighted aspects of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in respect of customer service.

Presentation on behalf of the RNID

Deafblind provided a brief summary of the problems faced by the hard of hearing and highlighted the fact that British Sign Language (BSL) may be a customer's first language, rather than English. Other available forms of communication such as the interpreter service, minicom and fax service were also available for energy suppliers to use. The various problems of call centres were also highlighted. Face-to-face contact with this group of customers was the best method of communication as it also enabled the use of lip reading by customers, although the costs of providing such a service were recognised.

Deafblind Presentation

Deafblind explained that customers with both sight and hearing loss pose a different and unique problem for energy suppliers, and commented that, in their view, the scale of the problem has been vastly underestimated due to under reporting. Deafblind highlighted the varying degrees of this disability, each of which had potentially different implications in terms of how to communicate with these customers:

- ◆ Totally deafblind
- ◆ Partially sighted and hearing
- ◆ Mobility, access to information, sight or hearing loss
- ◆ Tunnel vision.

Deafblind considered that the following assistance was useful when communicating with Deafblind customers:

- ◆ Better facilities for enabling calls by third parties
- ◆ Appropriate training for frontline staff and focus on ensuring clear speech.

National Grid (NG) raised the issue of contacting customers in respect of interruptions to supply, and whether it was possible to obtain information from local authorities who are obliged to identify Deafblind customers in their area.

Action Point: Ofgem to check with local authorities regarding the information they have about Deafblind residents and any issues/problems this may cause if they provided this information to network operators.

Help the Aged

Help the Aged are involved in a number of Benefits Advice Programmes (BAP) and work with a number of partner organisations such as British Gas in helping to raise awareness. They are currently involved in 21 projects in England, Wales and Scotland, and initiatives vary from project to project. Help the Aged shared their own experience of trying to communicate with elderly customers, and supporting them throughout the process when claiming benefits. One of the key problems cited was the fact that some of them are reluctant to claim allowances or benefits that they may be entitled to.

Attendees

1. Julie Jones-Ford Countrywide Utilities
2. Jackie Pickles (Regulatory & Billing Manager) Countrywide Utilities
3. Matt Rudling: EDF Energy
4. Mary Preece: EDF Energy
5. Luke Thomas: Account Manager, Help the Aged
6. Ann Neate: EDF Energy
7. Barry Adley: EDF Energy
8. Shankar Visvendran: Customer Manager Service Delivery, National Grid
9. Sam Mannion: Network Support Manager, Northern Gas Networks
10. Lorraine Reddington: Customer Liaison Manger, Central Networks
11. Clover Powell: energywatch
12. Gareth Wales: eaga group
13. Alison Sleightholm: Western Power
14. Gillian Riley: CE Electric
15. Catherine Emsley: CE Electric
16. Gerry Exell: SSE
17. Pamela Kelly: Scottish Power
18. Andy Burgess: E.ON (presenting)
19. Jade Kirk: E.ON
20. Julia Jones: E.ON
21. Mark Watson: ERA
22. Nicola Finney: RNIB
23. Jill Eddlestone: Clear Consultants (presenting on behalf of Mencap)
24. Nicola Bowles: ERA (presenting)
25. Emma Pocknell: npower
26. Richard Slane: Centrica
27. Siobonne Brewster: RNIB (presenting)

28. Katie Bensted: Help the Aged (presenting)

29. Georgette Vale: Deafblind (presenting)

30. Hannah Finnis: Centrica

Ofgem

Chris Lock

Mark Wiltsher

Maxine Frerk

Lisa Vango

Liz Chester

Sam Cope

Martin Abraham