

Introduction

Electricity is an essential service for everyone, but it can be truly vital for customers who are less able to fend for themselves. We understand that people who are chronically sick, the disabled, very elderly, deaf, blind, and perhaps some single parent families or people who have no one else to support them can need additional care during power cuts.

This submission outlines two initiatives that are delivering exceptional service levels to our customers who have special needs.

1. On-line Personal Support Service In Storms

We believe we have a responsibility to identify our less able customers and do our best for them, particularly when their electricity supply is interrupted, and we know that a friendly and supportive voice can make a world of difference. However, we understand there must be many people with special needs who have not registered, either through choice or because they are still unaware of the benefits of registering as a priority service customer.

It is particularly important to us that if electricity supplies are disrupted for an extended period, perhaps beyond 24 hours due to severe weather, then after that time we should be able to offer personal advice to every customer, including those with special needs - even if they are not registered for our priority service. In our view, answering customer calls using automated voice recording tools in these very difficult situations is not best practice, especially when less able customers who may lack confidence could be calling in to ask for help.

Consequently, we have processes in place in these situations to deliver high volume call centre facilities using our 'people' to engage with every caller, to understand their personal needs and to provide information and support if necessary. We believe that this flagship level of service can not be

provided by an automated voice recorded message.

In the severe storm of January 2007, unfortunately 172,000 customers had their supplies interrupted in our Southern Electric Power Distribution territory. Within 24 hours we were answering every call personally, with very short wait times. We deliberately did not use recorded messages, but instead gave every customer specific information about the situation affecting them, and we were able to offer appropriate support and advice to each caller depending on their personal needs. This enabled us to recognise when a caller was upset or frightened, and our team were then able to provide a listening ear, offer reassurance, and escalate the level of support where necessary.

One measure of the effectiveness (and uniqueness) of the above approach is the results of Ofgem's survey of customers who have contacted the fourteen distribution companies to assess the companies' performance. In the surveys carried out in the twelve months to March 2007, Scottish Hydro Electric was ranked first in each of the categories measured: speed of telephone response; politeness of staff; willingness of staff to help; accuracy of information provided; and usefulness of information provided.

2. Proactively Calling Our Special Needs Customers

We have a policy to call our Priority Service registered customers if they are affected by a power cut, offering information, support and advice. Where it would be helpful, we can call in the WRVS to assist with hot drinks, food or just a smiling face.

In the days following a power cut we proactively call back a selection of customers who were affected, to listen to their experience and this helps us to continually improve our service.

It is also important to keep our Priority Service Register as up to date as possible, but this is a challenging task because

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customers who are registered don't always advise us if their situation changes. One of our strategies to help keep our records up to date is to call our special needs customers on a regular basis to remind them of the benefits of the scheme and the advice and support we can offer. This conversation needs a tactful and empathetic approach as occasionally the customer may have died, and this can easily upset the person answering the phone. This process is useful and helps us to maintain accurate information.

Priority Customer Care