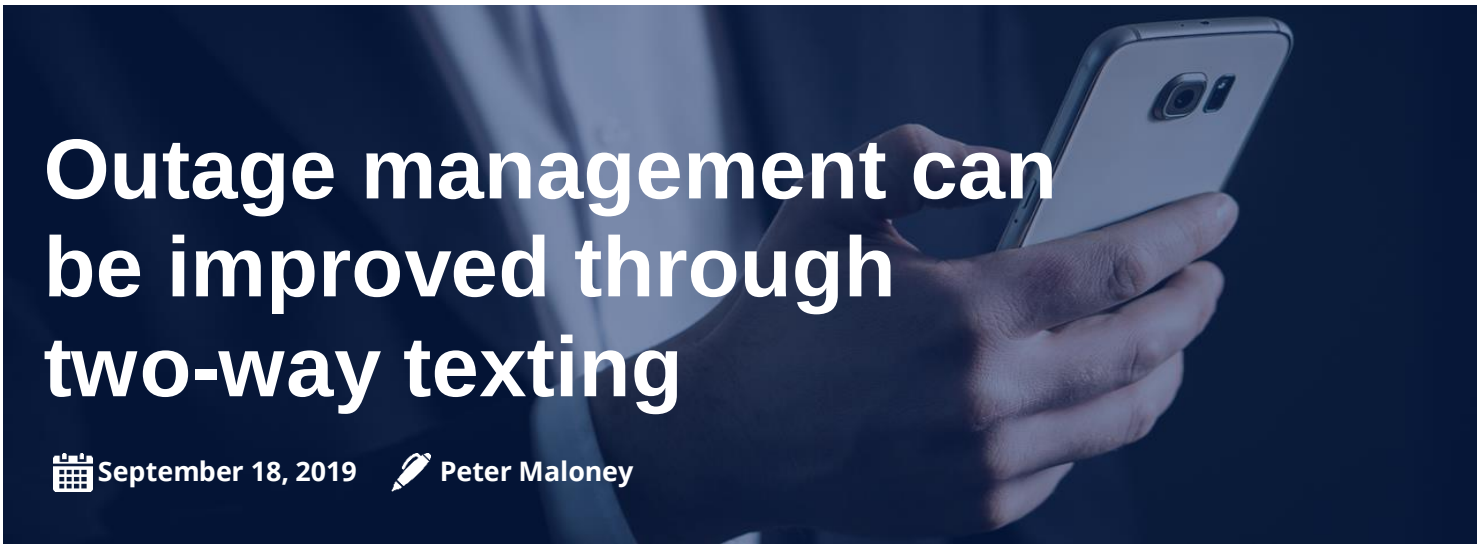

Outage management can be improved through two-way texting

September 18, 2019 Peter Maloney

Less than one year in, and CDE Lightband, the power and broadband services utility for the city of Clarksville, Tennessee is already considering expanding its use of texting. They have seen how it optimizes outage reporting, billing, and customer communications; as well as heard much positive feedback from customers.

CDE Lightband was already using texting for its billing and accounting systems customer billing notifications when, in 2018, the public power utility began considering texting for its outage management system.

“We were trying to find the best product that would get the message out automatically, even if there was only one customer without power,” Luann Warren, operations dispatch supervisor at CDE Lightband, said.

In October 2018, the utility worked with dataVoice and TextPower to handle the 2-way text messaging for its outage management system.

By December, CDE Lightband was live with TextPower’s system integrated into both its dataVoice outage management system (OMS) and within 3 months, its Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) systems. TextPower’s text messaging platform also was integrated with the Daffron software CDE Lightband uses for its Consumer Information System (CIS).

The TextPower system monitoring monitors CDE Lightband’s SCADA system and allows text messages to be sent to customers automatically when a power outage affects them.

Before implementing text messaging, outage notifications for customers involved setting up and recording a message on an Interactive Voice Response system. To hear that message, a customer had to call the utility and navigate a series of pre-recorded messages by choosing from a list of options. Texting outage notifications automatically now saves time for both the customer and the utility. Customers can be informed when an outage occurs without having to make a phone call, wait on hold or talk to a customer representative.

The system is two-way, allowing customers to report outages to the utility by merely texting the word “out” to the utility.

Automated texts can also be sent to indicate estimated restoration times or actual restoration. Customers can also request the status of an outage repair by texting “status” to the TextPower system.

When there are large outages, the volume of phone calls could easily overwhelm a utility call center, but text notification reduces the load on utility staff, freeing them up to perform other duties and avoiding the need to hire additional personnel. If a utility can move 50% of its outage calls to texting, it can reduce the number of trunk lines to buy and maintain or eliminate the need to add new lines, says Mark Nielsen, Executive Chairman of TextPower.

Texting services are also less expensive to operate on an ongoing basis, says Nielsen. The cost of a single text message is pennies, while the per unit cost of an IVR message is a dime or two. If a person is needed to answer the phone, the costs are measured in dollars, Nielsen says.

In addition, as outage notifications come in, they are automatically routed to the utility’s OMS where they provide data for predictive analysis that enables CDE Lightband to better pinpoint the location and extent of an outage and possibly to help isolate the cause.

“In the past, before we went to text, customers had to call in or go to our website, and they didn’t get status updates unless they were connected to us through social media,” Warren said.

Texting is more impactful than social media updates or emails. About 98% of text messages are read and 90% are read within three minutes of being received, compared to under 35% of followers on social media seeing a posting or tweet.

CDE Lightband had already discovered that using TextPower for billing notifications was valuable to not only customers, but the utility. CDE Lightband integrates text notifications with its paperless billing option. “Since implementation a little over a year ago, we have achieved a 15% paperless adoption rate,” said Warren.

Warren said it’s apparent that having the texting notifications (outgoing and incoming) has reduced the number of calls regarding outages because CDE Lightband is not nearly as overwhelmed in its call center or in its dispatch office.

When CDE Lightband has circuit outages, the mass texts automatically are sent so customers "know" CDE Lightband is aware and therefore, do not need to text back or call in. “We keep our customers informed with status updates/causes, estimated restore times and confirmations when the power is restored,” Warren noted. The customer really doesn't have to do anything in those cases. More and more customers favor this type of communication and CDE Lightband has received very positive feedback.

For public power utilities, TextPower allows them to use the service outside of the electric department. The parks and recreation department could send notices of events or Public Works could send notices about a road closure, Nielsen said.

“TextPower has provided information, instruction and support every step of the way. It has truly been a great experience…”

Luann Warren,
Operations – Dispatch Supervisor
CDE Lightband

CDE Lightband is set to launch a voluntary load reduction program that will be managed by its energy service department. The utility is looking to use TextPower for that program but would only enroll participants in the program with the texting service on a voluntary basis.

The Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA) is a Federal law that provides guidelines on how businesses can use texting services. In a 2016 ruling by the FCC in response to a filing by the Edison Electric Institute, the FCC ruled that utilities have the right to send texts or make automated calls to customers as long as the phone number was received by the utility from the customer at some point in their business relationship. Texts sent must relate to the utility service and not be selling a service or product.

In most cases, the rules are easy to follow, but some utilities were still wary of inadvertently violating the TCPA, specifically the rules about re-assigned numbers. But a March 2018 decision by the DC Court of Appeals greatly alleviated those concerns. Now, as long as the business follows the rules and gives the recipient an easy way to opt out of future messages, there is far less concern of a TCPA violation.

For both its billing and outage management texting programs, CDE Lightband did auto enrollment of participants. TextPower assisted by taking a file of all phone numbers in their customer files and identifying which numbers were active mobiles. Since over 48% of US households no longer use a landline phone, a utility doesn’t know which numbers are actually mobiles.

The utility has about 68,000 customers and about half of them were auto enrolled. Some customers do not have cell phones or active phone numbers. The utility has since launched a campaign to update the phone numbers of customers. For instance, customer service updates phone numbers with every call they take, Warren says.

The goal is to bring more customers on board with texting. “It is our responsibility to stay ahead as much as we can, to stay proactive, not reactive,” says Warren. “The texting revolution is here.” Customers expect us to communicate with them through the channel they prefer,” she added.

She said that the staff at TextPower has provided information, instruction and support every step of the way. “It has truly been a great experience to get our texting notifications integrated and implemented.”

For more information about TextPower, visit the company’s website.

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Authored by Peter Maloney