

SMARTER METERING FOR SMARTER CUSTOMER SERVICE



David Hartwell,
Head of Business
Development

David has created and delivered large scale technology solutions to Utility and Energy companies, across the world, for nearly 25 years; some notable ones are National Grid, ESB, Thames Water, South East Water, United Utilities, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, BP, Shell to name a few. He is an electronic engineer by nature; IoT has become a true fascination that joins his engineering and business solution skills.

+44 (0) 7834 572427

david.hartwell@
creative-ec.com

in Connect on LinkedIn

Throughout their history, the relationship of water companies to their customers has been focused on problem-solving. Generally, the role of the customer service department within a water company is to deal with inbound queries (read: complaints), whether relating to supply and pressure issues, billing or leak reporting. Meanwhile the majority of customers will have little direct contact with their supplier beyond receiving their quarterly bill.

For a long time, this type of relationship has suited both parties. However, when water supplies are squeezed and customer behaviour needs to change, it becomes imperative for water companies to be proactive and engaged in customer communications. With water stress affecting more regions of the UK as the effects of climate change are more keenly felt, a closer relationship will be needed to ensure messages get through and customers take action to save water.

Within PR19, Ofwat is encouraging water companies to address affordability and vulnerability, and to consider the ways in which the two are linked. For the industry regulator, building trust and confidence only follows from water companies having a thorough understanding of their customers' specific needs;

information that can be used to ensure their services are truly inclusive and accessible.

While water companies have a good track record on identifying vulnerable customers, the action taken only tends to extend to careful procedures around home visits and allowing slightly more leeway on payment issues. With a smart metering device like Waterfall installed, the possibility for monitoring the wellbeing of elderly and vulnerable people in a non-intrusive but highly insightful manner – via their water usage – becomes a reality. From the data, customer care teams (even social services) could be alerted to irregular or concerning water usage patterns indicating that a vulnerable individual is struggling or can no longer live independently. Not only that, smart metering can help to ensure financial assistance is targeted at the right customers and made easily accessible.

Another area where smart metering could improve customer service is in educating high-use customers. By providing customers with an app that tracks and informs them in real-time of their consumption patterns, a smart solution like Waterfall increases awareness of excessive use and its origins (from inefficient sprinklers to home jacuzzis or swimming pools). Thus, an unexpectedly high bill is no longer unexpected and doesn't



turn into a complaint. When complaints do come in, customer service teams are equipped with the detailed insight to explain how to bring use – and therefore bills – down to a normal level, or to take the necessary steps to resolve a leak, for example, if that action hasn't been automatically triggered.

On a wider scale, smarter metering will be a vital tool to drive necessary changes in customer behaviour, not only as a response to water shortages, but in order to help prevent them. Water companies know well in advance when rainfall is below average or a reservoir is in danger of running dry. Proactive messaging via an app on customers' smartphones, combined with an approach that incentivises careful water use rather than penalising careless water use could help avoid more severe measures like hosepipe bans. If the majority take action, the impact can be huge.

Water labelling has recently been explored by Defra as one promising avenue for reducing water scarcity. But even were it made compulsory for manufacturers tomorrow, the lifecycle of white goods would mean the effect would not be felt for another 10-15 years. What we refer to as 'virtual water labelling', on the other hand, could have a much more immediate impact.

Now more than ever, water companies have sophisticated tools at their disposal to help them take the initiative on customer service. Smarter metering could work wonders to improve water companies' net promoter scores. It promises to help you know your customers better, keep their bills (and water usage) down, and to open up a positive, productive dialogue that may well help to avert disasters in future.



For more information, contact enquiries@creative-ec.com
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