

THE SECRET TO

Customer Satisfaction

Energized, engaged and empowered employees translate into happy customers. Here's how to fire up your team.

The best service is no service. In a perfect world, your customers would never have a reason to call your utility. There would be no service issues because natural gas would flow without interruption. Outages would be non-existent. Every aspect of the service delivery process would be flawless and error-free. Instead of your service reps taking customer service calls, they would be busy taking compliments.

But as a natural gas utility, you live in the real world where systems break down, billing errors are made, outages happen and even the best employees make mistakes. When things go wrong, your customers expect you to fix the problem and fix it fast. The challenge for natural gas companies is to determine the right combination of high-tech solutions and human, high-touch interactions.



BY BARBARA BURKE

Find the Right Balance of Automation

With the advent of web-based solutions, customers no longer need to talk to a service rep to take care of routine transactions. During the last five years, a growing percentage of business and residential gas customers have taken advantage of convenient online options. Day or night, customers go online to pay their bill, start and stop service, sign up for budget billing and auto pay, monitor their usage and schedule a service appointment.

Investing in the latest technology can increase efficiency and reduce operating costs. But automating too many functions can actually degrade customer satisfaction. According to a recent report by CFI Group, customers are significantly more satisfied when they can talk with a live person. Those customers who had to go through a menu of IVR (interactive voice response) options before getting to an agent were much less satisfied than those who reached an agent quickly (66 percent vs. 79 percent, respectively).

Become Customer Centric

Customer expectations are at an all-time high and will continue to ratchet up. The fact that J.D. Power ranked the quality of your utility's service higher than the utility next door does not impress the average gas customer. Whether it's a fair comparison or not, today's customers compare the service they get from their utility with the service they receive from other companies. Customers ask themselves, "If I can get fabulous service from a Zappos service rep, why can't I get the same experience when I call my gas company?"

Zappos, Southwest Airlines and other companies with legendary service credit their success to highly engaged front-line employees who are passionate about giving their customers nothing less than stellar customer service. They achieve that by empowering their employees to "do what it takes" to please customers. Customer centricity isn't just the right thing to do—it's the smart thing to do. Delighted customers become raving fans, have greater loyalty, and are more likely to buy additional products and services.

In fact, dedicated employees are game-changers. Research has proven a direct correlation between high customer satisfaction and high employee engagement. Employee engagement scores account for as much as half of the variance in customer satisfaction scores. This translates into millions of dollars for companies if they can improve their scores. Studies demonstrated that engaged employees are more productive, more profitable, more customer-focused, safer and less likely to leave their employer.

For customer-centric companies, improving employee engagement is not a passing fad. Measuring and improving employee engagement is a core business strategy. According to the latest research by the Ascent Group on customer service success, the most highly rated companies focus on the human aspect of customer care. Ascent Group says: "People matter. Engaged employees are the key to excellent customer service. Engaged employees are employees who feel as though they are truly valued at work; that their efforts directly contribute toward the mission and success of the company."

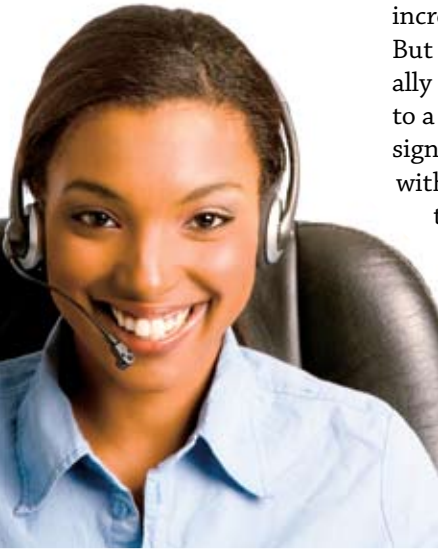
The definition of "employee engagement" varies. Most experts agree that engaged

Use Benchmarking to Make Wise Purchases

BY KEMAR R. PHILLIPS

In early 2009, Public Service Electric and Gas (PSE&G), New Jersey's largest electric and natural gas utility, launched a robust suite of web tools as part of a broad new customer information system rollout. The new web tools enable customers to schedule service appointments, view outage information, conduct a personalized home energy analysis and much more.

For each customer who signs up for a PSE&G web account, the utility needs to own a web license, at a cost of roughly \$1 per user. The licenses are sold in bundles in advance, and the cost per license drops as the volume of licenses purchased increases. Obviously, utilities that offer such accounts face a critical decision in determining how many licenses to buy, so they don't overpay or over-purchase.



employees care about the future of the company and dedicate their discretionary effort to making the company successful. In customer service, engaged employees consistently deliver top customer care by “going the extra mile” for customers.

The bad news is that as important as these stellar performers are to your company’s profitability and long-term viability, only a small percentage of employees are truly engaged. According to the Gallup Organization landmark study, only 28 percent of the 80,000 people surveyed considered themselves fully engaged in their work. Over half (54 percent) of the respondents were not actively engaged, and 17 percent were not just disengaged, they were actively undermining the company’s performance.

Engage Employees

Studies by Gallup, Towers & Perrin, Melcrum and others point to several internal drivers of employee engagement, the most important of which is the quality of supervision and support employees receive from their immediate supervisor. According to Gallup,

“Supervisors who cultivate positive, caring relationships with agents generate high levels of engagement.”

It makes sense that when front-line service representatives are confident that their supervisor cares about them, they feel more valued. When employees feel valued, they are eager to pass that positive feeling on to their customers by making them feel valued and important.

Call center supervisors who have highly engaged reps don’t see themselves as an enforcer of performance; they see their job as a manager and developer of front-line talent. Conventional supervisors rate the person and develop the performance. This new breed of supervisor does just the opposite—he or she rates the performance and develops the person. Highly effective leaders believe that every person is different and should be treated as such.

Despite the fact that quality supervision is a critical success factor in delivering superior customer service and a key driver to employee engagement, supervisors are among the most under-trained and ill-prepared employees in many utilities. Most supervisors

At PSE&G, customers signed up for our web accounts at a rate that exceeded all business case projections. Within seven months, more than 400,000 customers were enrolled. We were quickly on our way to exhausting our inventory of licenses. We needed to determine how many additional licenses to purchase, but we did not want to make the decision in the dark.

So we turned to the American Gas Association/Edison Electric Institute DataSource customer service metrics benchmarking program to help us find the answer. The DataSource program compiles data from nearly 100 AGA/EEI member-company natural gas, electric and combination utilities about their processes, strategies and results in one or more of the following areas: call centers, billing, credit and collection, meter reading, field services, customer information systems, customer web sites, payment

offices, payment processing, low-income accounts, industrial and commercial accounts, and revenue protection. Participants then can compare their data with those of other utilities using filtering tools that allow them to select their own peer group according to company size, type of company (natural gas, electric or combo), number of customers served, region of country, etc.

At PSE&G, we wanted to know how our total web enrollment compared with other utilities. DataSource showed us which utilities offered web accounts and the number of customer accounts per company. We then researched the total number of customers per company to determine web enrollment rates and calculate how we compared. That data told us our enrollments already fell within the 40th percentile, just nine months after going live with the system.

Based on this information, and the way our enrollment rate was trending—an average of 850 new customers per day—we decided to purchase enough licenses for 1 million more customers via a five-year agreement. This agreement allows us to reach a sign-up rate that will position PSE&G within the top quartile of DataSource utilities—something we hope to achieve over the next five years.

Benchmarking enabled us to use a data-driven approach to make a comfortable and smart purchasing decision.

Editor’s Note: To learn more about DataSource and to participate in this year’s program, contact AGA’s Jim Linn at 202/824-7272 or jlinn@aga.org.

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are experienced service reps promoted from within the call center. They have learned the technical and systems side of managing a call center, but rarely do they receive in-depth training in coaching and mentoring—two of the basic skills for gaining employee commitment and engagement.

Engagement skills training for supervisors is a multi-part process. First, to drive the engagement of others, supervisors need to be fully engaged themselves. Supervisors must take an honest look at their level of personal commitment to service excellence. Supervisors then should discuss their self-assessment with their manager.

Next, using a brief web-based survey, each service rep should be asked to evaluate the quality of support they receive from their supervisor. Survey results will drive the content of the classroom training. Using a blend of classroom and hands-on practice sessions, supervisors will master coaching and mentoring skills. Most important, they will learn to tailor their support approach to the unique requirements of each employee.

The last part of the training process, and the most crucial, is practicing what they learn. Supervisors support one another in the learning process. Success is measured by the direct feedback supervisors get from their employees and via quarterly engagement surveys.

In addition to engagement skills training, customer service call center supervisors require three more ingredients to succeed: time, tools and accountability.

TAKE TIME TO COACH. Internal surveys reveal that what customer service reps crave most is quality “face time” with their supervisor. Eight out of 10 supervisors asked if they could meet that need said they were too busy with other tasks. But when these same supervisors examined how they spent their time, they discovered they could easily increase the amount of face time with their team if they let go of “low-value” tasks and activities.

SHARE STORIES TO BUILD TRUST.

Trust is the cornerstone of employee engagement. Supervisors gradually build trust by taking the time to get to know each employee. And by discussing stories—such as fables and parables that teach life

lessons—supervisors can better connect with their employees in meaningful ways. They can discuss how to achieve work-life balance, live their core values, solve relationship issues at work and with family, as well as learn healthy ways for dealing with the inherent challenges of working in a customer service call center.

REALIZE THAT WHAT GETS MEASURED GETS

DONE. When supervisors are responsible for employee engagement survey scores, they dedicate the time and energy necessary to meet that goal. Many are delighted to discover that when their team’s engagement scores improved, so did other performance metrics. In a recent survey, supervisors commented that while they already knew how important it was to connect with their reps and build a more trusting relationship, having the engagement survey data provided important validation.

Customer Service Is People Helping People

It is clear that the key to long-term success and profitability for natural gas companies is their ability to meet the rising expectations of their residential and business customers. The challenge for executives is to strike the right balance between high-tech solutions and human, high-touch interactions. By all means, deploy new technology to make it even easier for your customers to do business with you. Focus the rest of your resources on making your employees feel valued. As you craft your plans for the future, let one basic fact be your guide: Customer service is the business of people helping people. ♡

BARBARA BURKE is a customer service expert, speaker and author of the modern-day fable set in a utility call center, The Napkin, The Melon & The Monkey. She is a featured speaker at the AGA/EEI Customer Service Conference & Exposition, which is being held in Milwaukee April 11–14. Burke will discuss “The Secret to Customer Satisfaction: Energized, Engaged & Empowered Employees” at 8 a.m., Wednesday, April 14. To learn more about Barbara Burke, visit www.barbaraburke.com; to learn more about the AGA/EEI Customer Service Conference & Exposition, visit www.aga.org and click on “Events,” or contact AGA’s Jim Linn at jlinn@aga.org.

