

THE POWER OF ACCURATE CUSTOMER CONTACT INFORMATION



MEMBER SUCCESS STORY



Town of Clayton

The Background

Public power utilities play a vital role in ensuring reliable, affordable electricity for local communities. Unlike investor-owned models, municipal utilities operate in the public interest, reinvesting any surplus revenue back into the community rather than distributing profits to shareholders. This community-focused approach emphasizes reliability, customer satisfaction, and responsive communication. In an era where digital communication is central to nearly every aspect of daily life, having accurate customer contact information on file, including email addresses, is crucial. This case study explores why collecting and maintaining updated customer contact information is essential for public power municipal utilities. It provides a real-world example from the Town of Clayton, whose public power utility department recently launched a new Outage Management System (OMS). The Town of Clayton Utility Department is a member of ElectriCities, a Public Power Joint Action Agency based in Raleigh, North Carolina.

The Challenge

Through surveys, emails to City Council members, social media channels, and face-to-face communications, the Town of Clayton's customers let the utility know that they wanted a better and faster way to learn about outages and other

emergency situations—the type of communication an OMS can provide. However, to successfully launch and maximize the value of an OMS, utilities must have accurate customer contact information.

The Challenge: Continued

For many public power utilities, including the Town of Clayton, customer communication has traditionally been conducted via postal mail, phone, or in-person interactions. However, with the increased use of digital platforms, utilities have started to rely more on email and text messaging for critical communications. Without up-to-date email addresses or cell phone numbers on file, public power utilities face several significant challenges:

- ▶ **Customer Frustration:** When customers feel they aren't informed in a timely manner, they can become dissatisfied, undermining the community trust on which municipal utilities thrive.
- ▶ **Delayed Communication:** Without updated contact information, notifications and outreach about important events, such as power outages, scheduled maintenance, and road closures, may not reach every customer.
- ▶ **Missed Opportunities for Engagement:** Outdated contact information prevents utilities from gathering valuable customer feedback through surveys, questionnaires, or engagement campaigns.

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Ann Game
Revenue and Customer Service Director
Town of Clayton

The Solution

In preparation for the launch of the new OMS, the Town of Clayton embarked on a campaign to update its customer contact information. According to Ann Game, the Town of Clayton's Revenue and Customer Service Director, customer feedback played a significant role in the decision to implement the new OMS. The Town of Clayton utility department quickly identified the need and benefits to the community, and in cooperation with the City Council, identified an OMS software partner and began collecting updated customer contact information.

While the operational implementation of the OMS was underway, the utility customer service team implemented an integrated strategy to collect updated customer contact

information while ensuring customers that providing their information would help them get emergency updates from the utility department quickly.

The strategy included:

- ▶ **Incentivized Data Collection:** The Town of Clayton organized a drawing, offering the chance to win a high-value prize in exchange for a customer supplying updated contact information. This created an immediate incentive for customers to provide accurate and current information, which was in turn used to update their contact information on file.
- ▶ **User-Friendly Online Form:** A simplified online form, accessed via QR code, was developed to make it easy for customers to update their information in a matter of minutes. The form remains active on the Town of Clayton's website to continue collecting updated customer contact information.
- ▶ **Proactive Communication via Multiple Channels:** The utility reached out to customers through bill inserts, through social media campaigns, on its website, and through in-person events to encourage email address and cell phone number updates. This multichannel approach helped them reach different customer demographics.
- ▶ **Customer Service Interactions:** The Town of Clayton receives around 2,000 calls per month, which provides the opportunity to verify a caller's contact information on every call and explain how the customer will benefit from the new OMS.

The Results

The Town of Clayton is pleased with the outcome of the initiative. Over 1,200 customers supplied updated contact information within the first six weeks of the campaign, and the utility successfully launched its new OMS system in April 2024. The OMS system automatically notifies customers of outages and allows customers to report outages, and the utility can provide real-time updates and information to customers.

"Before we implemented the OMS, we had to wait for the phone to ring to find out a customer had an outage," Game explains. "We used door hangers to notify customers of planned outages. With the new OMS, as soon as an outage is reported by the system, crews can immediately begin investigating while we notify customers by text message and email."

Feedback has been extremely positive. Customers appreciate being able to use the OMS to text the utility department when there's an outage in their area, which greatly reduces call center backlog. From the utility's perspective, a customer service representative (CSR) can ensure an outage is on the map instantly, and information is seamlessly shared between the utility department and the CSR team, leading to faster restoration and higher customer satisfaction.

An unexpected benefit of the new OMS is being able to use it for Interactive Voice Response messaging. The Town of Clayton uses the system to notify customers of late bills, street closures, and other emergency situations, which reduces workload for CSRs and allows them to focus their time on customer needs. From the Joint Action Agency perspective, each member utility's OMS can be fully integrated into the ElectriCities Outage Map, which provides outage visibility for the State of N.C. Emergency Response team, and the American Public Power Association's eReliability Tracker, which feeds national and state benchmark reports. Accurate reliability metrics enable system improvement strategies while ensuring comprehensive coverage and response during outages.

Maintaining updated customer contact information has several notable benefits:

- ▶ **Improved Communication:** The utility can notify customers about outages quickly, resulting in fewer complaints and higher customer satisfaction. For planned maintenance outages, communication is timely and efficient.
- ▶ **Faster Emergency Response:** During a major storm event, the utility can send real-time updates about power restoration efforts, greatly reducing call center volume and enabling field crews to focus on restoring power.

- ▶ **Enhanced Customer Engagement:** The utility can conduct customer surveys and polls using email, receiving a higher response rate than traditional methods. This feedback provides actionable insights for improving services. Customers are also able to indicate how they want to receive information, and the utility can send texts, emails, or a combination of both based on customer preference.
- ▶ **Building for the Future:** Accurate contact information enables the utility to effectively engage and educate customers about new programs, services, and more.

In Conclusion

Having up-to-date customer information on file is essential for public power municipal utilities to communicate effectively with their customers and can increase success in new program adoption and system updates. Paired with strong systems and processes, it enhances responsiveness, improves customer satisfaction, and helps utilities operate more efficiently. The proactive steps the Town of Clayton took to update its email and phone records resulted in tangible benefits for both the utility and its customers. As the digital age continues to transform customer expectations, maintaining accurate contact information will be a key component of any successful utility management strategy.

Municipal utilities with accurate customer information not only streamline their operations, but also strengthen their relationship with the communities they serve, reinforcing their mission to deliver reliable, affordable, and responsive services to their customers.

About ElectriCities

ElectriCities of North Carolina, Inc., is the membership organization that provides power supply and related critical services to over 90 community-owned electric systems in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia—collectively known as public power. ElectriCities manages the power supply for two power agencies in North Carolina and provides technical services to assist members in operating their electric distribution systems. ElectriCities also helps these locally owned and operated public power providers thrive today and in the future by delivering innovative services, including legislative, technical, communications, and economic development expertise. To learn more about the benefits of public power, visit www.electricities.com and see how ElectriCities helps communities keep the lights on through access to safe, reliable, and affordable energy.