Building Trust With Your Utility Customers

Now's the time to refocus the customer experience.

brillion

Your customers are expecting an experience that includes everything from detailed usage information and more rate plan options to digital tools and the highest level of customer service—one that's on par with the retail, banking, and tech experiences they receive every day.

Customer expectations are evolving. Trust plays a critical role in the future success of utility companies.

Contents

12%
of customers
trust their utility*

Most customers don't trust their utility.

Low trust in your utility can hinder customer involvement in your service and program offerings; however, your customer participation is crucial for your transition to the smart grid.

*According to UK brand intelligence firm Ello Group (2022)

Why don't customers trust their utility?

Utilities—*just like yours*—have struggled with customer trust for years. One study found that customers are less satisfied and less trusting of their utility than ever before—and that still holds true today. And it's not a problem localized to the US either—a UK study found that only 12% of customers trust their utility. Your organization's trustworthiness is determined by your competence in providing its services and products, as well as your intent to meet customer needs. However, consumers often lack the information they need to make accurate assessments of their utility's competence, leading to a lack of trust.

Although customers may be satisfied with utility service, they don't trust their utility's advice or digital competency. They expect their utility company to help them manage their energy portfolio and provide tools to help them better understand their usage, but they lose faith as time goes by without hearing about possible solutions.

Historically, utilities have been seen as "digital dinosaurs." This perception creates problems for both customers and the industry when the future of utilities heavily relies on innovation and offerings like energy efficiency, distributed energy, and solar.

When it comes to websites and mobile apps, most utilities are just getting started or not investing enough resources to improve their overall user experience (UX). Utility websites and mobile apps significantly fall behind other industries in terms of customer satisfaction scores (CSAT), with many utilities not even offering mobile apps. Utilities that are missing the mark on customer expectations are in turn missing a key opportunity to drive engagement and build trust.

Trust is the key to resilience.

The highest-performing electric, gas, and water utilities make trust a top priority.

According to Cogent Syndicated report from Escalent (2023)
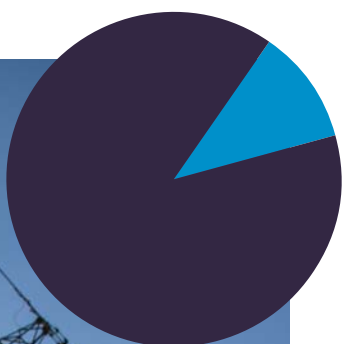
Customers enrolled in energy-management programs resulted in an

11% higher brand trust score*

According to a survey, building trust is essential to stronger engagement between the consumer and their utility company. By taking active steps to improve trust and engagement, your utility will see exponential returns and benefits for both you and your customers.

When customers have trust in your organization, they are less likely to require support, and much nicer if they do need it, saving your utility time and money. Your customer team can be focused on more high-priority initiatives and the team will be happier, reducing turnover and improving job satisfaction. Customers will be more patient and confident in your utility's ability to restore service as soon as possible after an outage because they trust you're prepared, and, utilities in general will have an easier time coming back after extreme weather events.

Customers will also be more likely to support changes you have to make to the electricity delivery system and rates if your utility provides an out-front communication strategy that explains why you need to increase rates. Your customers trust you to set fair and reasonable rates, and if you are transparent, rate perceptions can actually improve.

Customer mistrust undermines your utility goals and growth strategies, impacting your carbon reduction efforts and long-term credibility.

If customers do not trust your utility, they will likely be unwilling to participate in utility programs. Lack of trust negatively affects the impact customer participation can have on your utility's carbon reduction goals in the short term. In the long term, failing to deliver on these goals will further destroy trust, loyalty and credibility with both your customers and eventually your regulators.

Your utility can use investments in customer loyalty to build your brand in new and important ways. Loyal customers will tell utilities what's good and bad about the customer experience and identify areas for improvement. By paying attention and letting customers know that you're listening, your utility can reap some huge benefits. J.D. Power found that electric and gas utilities with the strongest brands face less resistance to rate increases, greater customer adoption of enhanced programs, and higher customer satisfaction rankings.

CASE STUDY

CoServ sought out Brillion Engage and Educate 10 years ago to improve their home assessments and grow their digital engagement methods. They have since expanded into energy calculators, video bill explanations, mid-bill cycle alerts, and more.

Results: Increased team productivity and reduced customer energy consumption, building stronger connections with their customers, and a combined 42-point J.D. Power Score increase in the Communications and Customer Care segments.

Results of increased trust:

✓ Increased Customer Engagement

Digital communication methods, such as your website, social media pages, or marketing emails, are the first stop for customers when they experience a problem or need more information. Loyal customers are more likely to engage with your utility across multiple channels—from high enrollment in efficiency programs and regular logins into self-service tools to successful outreach and communication campaigns. Strengthening engagement lets customers know that your organization is prepared when challenges arise. When customers show high engagement, they believe your utility will be competent and consistent with customer interests in return.

✓ Higher CSAT Scores

Loyal customers can be your best brand ambassadors, leading to improved customer insights, stronger performing programs, and higher CSAT scores. Customers are looking for a brand that aligns with their own needs and interests. They take note of how your utility interacts with their community, delivers beyond-the-meter programs, and aligns with their broader lifestyle goals. Utilities with the highest brand appeal scores have higher customer satisfaction scores and outperform their peers on customer trust, marketing execution, and company reputation metrics. Customers with high brand affinity for their utility are more likely to participate in community activities, enroll in conservation or energy efficiency programs, seek utility advice on home upgrades or electric vehicles, and visit utility marketplaces.

✓ Increased Revenue

For a utility, customer retention is more profitable than acquiring new ones—it can cost up to 5X more to acquire a new customer compared to retaining the ones you already have. Customer satisfaction can predict utility profits even if customers are unable to switch providers. That's because satisfied and engaged customers are more likely to repeat purchases or upgrade their accounts. Customers with high brand trust are more likely to support rate increases too. In addition, with the rise of new technology, products and services, utilities are facing competition from non-utility companies to provide these offerings. Brand trust plays a significant role in positioning utilities ahead of these companies to capture market share for new options. Utilities with high brand trust have more influence on customer purchase decisions and are more likely to be considered for new offerings, leading to revenue growth.

Improved Customer Retention

The power of loyal customers can have major benefits on your utility. After all, they're excited to share their positive experiences with others and your utility's philanthropy and community programs become more well-known. Building and investing in your utility's brand can protect your organization against future customer and load defection as customers consider distributed energy resources. With utilities now competing with non-utility companies for new offerings, you have to come up with customer experiences that are better than what a customer can find in other ways. Better customer retention leads to happier customers that are more engaged, satisfied, and loyal.

Savvier Customer Base

When customers trust your utility, they will go straight to you for information regarding solar installation, demand response, and other programs instead of the door-knocking salesperson who's often misinformed on their specific home requirements. When your customers are properly informed on your offerings, you're not wasting time and resources trying to go back and correct their misconceptions. If your utility doesn't make information easily available, your customers are going to go somewhere less reputable to find the information they're looking for and believe it.

CONCLUSION

The benefits are endless. So, how can you build back trust with your customers?

How can you get your customers willing—if not excited—to participate in utility programs? Keep reading to find out.

The first step in improving trust is identifying issues.

Understanding the signs of low trust in your utility is essential for you to improve operations with trust at the forefront. Wondering how your utility stacks up against common trust benchmarks?

Ten Ways to Spot Low Customer Trust:

01 Avoidance
Customers skip past you for their energy services.

02 Security concerns
Customers doubt your ability to keep systems and personal data secure.

03 Low engagement
Low customer interaction on offerings like energy efficiency programs, online tools, and new rate structures.

04 Service concerns
Call center has a high volume of calls about billing or service complaints.

05 Necessity-only communication
You only contact customers when you need them to pay their bill.

06 Communication gaps
Poor communication between you, your customers, and across departments.

07 Reactive communication
Don't proactively share information to educate customers on various offerings.

08 Underutilized data
Insufficient use of the data you have for targeted customer outreach.

09 Poor customer satisfaction
Low scores in CSAT metrics.

10 Poor reputation
Negative public perception in media coverage and social media.
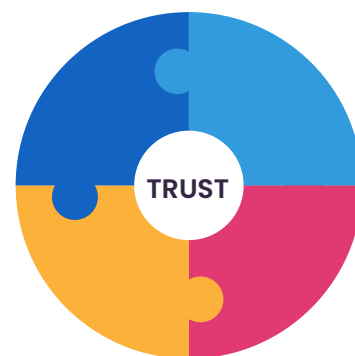
Best Practices

Help your team build trust, improve customer engagement, and get everyone to move toward the clean energy transition.

1. Live up to Customer Expectations

You need to have a better understanding of who your customers are through your customer service functions. The most effective ones provide a better picture of your customers' needs, behaviors, and wants. Tailoring content and communication based on customer data helps build trust and foster engagement, leading to higher satisfaction and lower energy use.

Learn more on page 10.

2. Actions Speak Louder Than Words

"Values attraction" is a huge part of what draws a customer in and makes them stay. For companies, this means creating and acting on company principles that align with your customers' values. Utilities that are committed to sustainability and incorporate these values into customer interactions enhance trust and customer retention.

Learn more on page 13.

3. Digital Dinosaur No More

Utilities must embrace and invest in tools that can both make the customer experience simple and improve efficiency for internal teams. Technology empowers customers to manage their energy use more effectively and supports utilities in encouraging engagement and long-term loyalty.

Learn more on page 15.

4. Collaboration is Key

Choosing effective tools purpose-built by expert partners is critical to harness trust. After all, you want your operations and customer experience elevated by technology—not dragged down. Key qualities to look out for include an all-in-one solution, seamless integrations, AI capabilities, owning your data, industry expertise, ability to scale, and dedicated support.

Learn more on page 16.

1. Live up to Customer Expectations

Personalize the Customer Journey

The "customer of today" is a tech-savvy buyer who needs detailed usage information, different rate options, and digital communication tools. They expect personalized experiences, quick problem-solving, and easy access to information.

To address customer needs, start by prioritizing personalized communications, proactive problem resolution, and self-service options. The easiest solution is to let customers find answers to common problems on their own. This helps you by reducing calls to your call centers and saving them time by not waiting on hold. It also means expanding your online presence to include mobile apps and ensure your website is attractive, easy to navigate, and has up-to-date information.

It's also important to provide personalized recommendations and solutions. They want to hear from you, but want it on their terms and schedule. Proactively engage your customers and invite them to participate in products and services that can most realistically increase the value of their customer experience by tailoring informative content such as blogs, videos, or infographics. Deploying content at the right time and on the right channel can make a huge difference when trying to establish deeper relationships with your customers—in turn furthering trust.

More trust between utilities and their customers leads to increased customer engagement, and personalization is a key way to do this. Personalized digital engagement strategies are essential for utilities moving forward. It can help customers choose the right plan or gives them the ability to proactively reduce usage, in addition to building trust.

Tailoring each touchpoint to individual customer needs and preferences drives high engagement and shows your customers you can be trusted because you know who they are. Here are a few ways you can get started:

WARM WELCOMES

Make a good first impression with the oh-so-important welcome email to generate interest and get customers excited about their relationship with you. This is a great first touchpoint to gather customer data to personalize messages in the future.

BE A VALUABLE RESOURCE

Provide customers with useful content they can use in their daily lives. Show customers how they can get the most out of your services by adding educational information to your website and social media pages. Sharing your expertise as an industry leader shows customers they can trust you, further boosting engagement.

KEEP CUSTOMERS IN THE KNOW

Transparent and timely communication is crucial to building trust with your customers. They can't ignore digital communication when it helps keep them up to date on any planned or extreme weather outages and rate hikes. Don't leave them in the dark—literally!

DID YOU KNOW?

It takes people an average of **7X** to see something and take action.

The average consumer encounters 4K-10K messages every day. So, you have a lot of competition to grab their attention. Your utility needs to repeat information, use omnichannel methods, and keep it up until you're sick of it! Only then will your customers just be starting to get it.

The way in which you communicate is also fundamental to building trust. Utilities need to start prioritizing personalized communication to align with customer expectations.

Sending and receiving their monthly bills should not be the only interaction you have with them—not enough utilities are taking advantage of personalized videos and targeted emails. It's important to engage early with customers, providing timely and proactive communication.

Generating accurate, customized, and proactive communication is vital. You can use customer data to tailor communication such as alerts, tips, and programs or services that align with their specific needs. For example, you can provide high bill data and offer ways to correct a potentially high bill during a mid-cycle alert to give customers time to reduce energy use. From usage reviews to bill previews, having personalized outreach that caters to individual needs will lower energy use, increase savings, reduce call center calls, and build trust.

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Grab your customers' attention and exceed their expectations.

Your Bill

$137⁴⁵

ENGAGE

Powered by AI and behavioral science, our outbound communication suite helps your utility send the perfect video or email message to each customer exactly when they need it. Every message is highly targeted, personalized, and automatically delivered at key interaction points. Send the right message to the right customer on the right channel at the right time.

2. Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Showcase Customer Values in Your Practices

Socially responsible behavior is a sign of trustworthiness to customers. For utilities, demonstrating behavior that favors the environment or philanthropy seems to give a greater indicator of trustworthiness, leading consumers to choose these companies along with their products and services.

One study found that utilities that make pro-environmental investments have the strongest and more consistent effect on customer trust, and that the effect of utility behavior on willingness to participate in programs is mediated by trust. In addition to values attraction, "capabilities attraction"—how to deliver on values while serving customers— is another aspect that retains customers. It's important to focus on transforming and modernizing the core capabilities you offer. This helps bring customer values to life in new ways through customer insights and personalized digital experiences. To keep things engaging, it's important to find innovative ways to incorporate values into customer interactions.

Utilities, more than any industry, have the power to empower customers to have a direct impact on mitigating climate change.

There are both emotional and functional elements when it comes to a utility's brand, and environmental dedication is comprised of both. Emphasize your commitment to a sustainable, cleaner energy future in communications and actions.

80%

of consumers are more likely to buy from a company that stands up for the environment*

According to a Consumer Intelligence Survey by PWC

Your utility must be a champion of the energy transition.

You sit at the heart of the decarbonization movement and it's impossible to ignore the correlation between what utilities are doing to support the transition and the impact on customer values attraction. At this point, green messaging is not enough to gain your customers' trust unless you back the messaging with action. Personalization, in addition to driving engagement, is also necessary when it comes to customer values and being a champion of the energy future.

Here are a few ways you can curate a customer experience relating to customer values—increasing trust, engagement, and making a difference in the environment:

PERSONALIZE YOUR PROGRAMS

Energy efficiency programs may be available to everyone, but they don't always appeal to everyone in the same way. Leverage customer data to adjust how you communicate programs and services with customers to maximize personalization and encourage customer loyalty.

ENGAGE AND EDUCATE

Improving customer relationships, encouraging engagement, and building trust can be as simple as messaging customers about things they care about, like energy efficiency or electric vehicles. Educate customers about energy saving techniques, conservation programs, and renewable energy options via multiple channels, but be mindful of meeting customers where they are when you share the information.

GO BEYOND THE METER

Offer more programs, new products and services, or an efficiency marketplace to show customers you add additional value besides sending a bill. Diversifying your offerings is another great way to appeal to multiple customer types. For example, energy efficiency programs might not be applicable to renters of small homes or apartments. Instead, you could offer an electric vehicle charging station map to provide additional value.

AUDIT AND ADJUST

Show customers you value their time by listening to their feedback and making appropriate changes. Demonstrate you offer value that's aligned with their needs and interests, taking into consideration your vulnerable customers. Matching your actions with what's important to all your customers helps improve engagement, loyalty, and trust.

3. Digital Dinosaur No More

Stay Up to Date on Technology

Utilities must embrace and invest in tools that can both make the customer experience simple and improve efficiency for internal teams.

Technology has the power to automate standard tasks and provide valuable information on customer preferences and problems that utilities didn't have insight into before. The data collected can be used to more accurately segment users and make data-driven decisions. The integration of advanced technology into utility infrastructure has enabled the rollout of initiatives that are aimed at reducing energy consumption, increasing customer satisfaction and engagement, and nurturing long-term loyalty.

Technology is a powerful customer experience ally. It empowers customers to take control of their own energy usage and allows utilities to engage more intelligently with them. It also definitively leads to better energy efficiency habits from the consumer.

Digital transformation directly impacts users experiences amid the energy transition. Utilities can upgrade facilities and infrastructure remotely, collect and analyze massive amounts of data, integrate information into cloud-based management systems, enhance cybersecurity, and rethink the customer experience.

4. Collaboration Is Key

What to Look for in a Trusted Partner

Working with industry experts and choosing effective, purpose-built tools is the most important thing to harness trust. You don't want to be dragged down by technology. It needs to support your team, improve collaboration across departments, and be reliable for you and your customers.

Below are some key qualities to look for in a technology partner:

1. All-in-One Solution:

You have enough internal data silos. You don't need more disparate point-solutions that don't talk to each other and create more confusion.

2. Seamless and Powerful Integrations:

Repair loose connections and build upon the data you already have from billing, customer relationship management platforms, marketing systems, GIS, and more.

3. Utilize AI Technology:

Get more done with the same amount of resources and in quicker time.

4. Own Your Data:

You use your data your way, however you want and need to use it. A partner should not hold your data captive.

5. Purpose Built by Industry Experts:

Look for a partner that has industry experts engrained across the company, so you don't have to spend extra time teaching them about your industry. For example, our team has over 1000 years of industry and customer success experience.

6. Ability to Grow and Scale:

Your utility is growing, and your technology partner should grow with you. Seek solutions that allow you to start small and add on if and when you need more. It's a red flag if you feel pressured to add more features you don't think you'll use.

7. Dedicated Support:

Find a partner who believes "we're all in this together," ready with their dedicated customer success, support, and implementation teams to help meet your goals on time.

Avoid Overload and Increase Efficiency

Assuming internal IT teams are not able to keep up with the demands of the multiple different tools that are needed to be effective, it's important to remember that utilities don't have to work alone!

There are countless partner resources out there to make sure all steps are done strategically and seamlessly. Leverage strategic partnerships by embracing product and service providers who are here to help utilities.

Conclusion:

Customer trust is essential for the future success of utilities.

Having a customer base that trusts you with their data—and to make appropriate decisions—is crucial for your transition to the smart grid. You can build back that trust by living up to customer expectations, showcasing customer values in your daily operations, staying up to date on technology, and engaging with trusted partners who are meant to help utilities. From data insights and engagement tools to program management platforms, if your goal is to engage more customers in smarter ways and build trust at the same time, **we can help you accomplish it.**
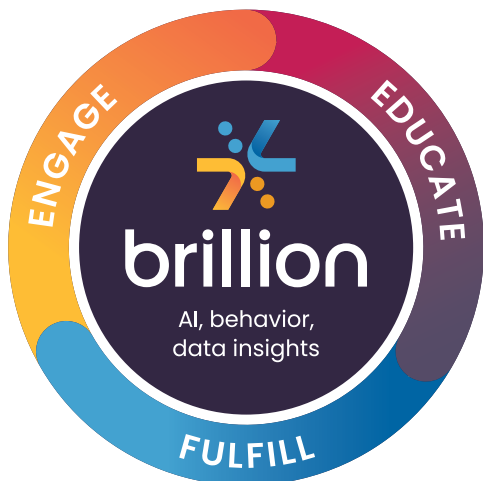
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About Brillion

The Customer Engagement Application Suite Built for Utilities—Just Like You

Brillion is how your utility can finally turn every customer relationship into a true partnership. From video bill explanations and self-service education tools to smarter program workflows, we make it easier to get everyone working together to meet your goals.

With Brillion, now they're all in. And it's because you have a way to:

- **Spark the Interest:** You can't change customers' minds if they're not listening.

- **Streamline the Process:** Stop wrangling spreadsheets and emails and start getting things done.

- **See the Progress:** Never be in the dark about how you're doing or ways you can improve.
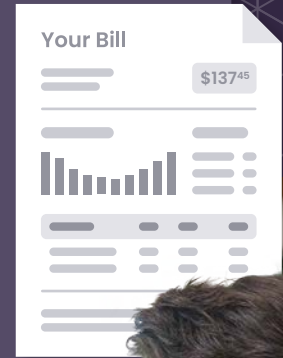
ENGAGE   EDUCATE   FULFILL

brillion
AI, behavior, data insights

Coordinating more people and data than ever before? Brillion is here to help.

- **Customers**
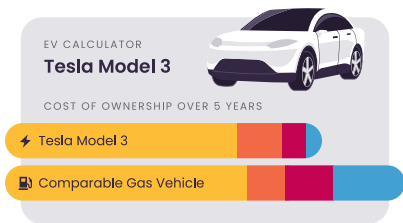- **Trade Allies**
- **Regulators**
- **Data Sources**

What Can I Do with Brillion Solutions?

Brillion Engage

Exceed customer expectations by giving your customers the first-rate experience they expect. Powered by AI and behavioral science, our outbound communication suite helps you send the perfect video message to each customer exactly when they need it.

Brillion Educate

Help your customers understand their energy use and take action to manage it. Virtual audits, videos, web-based calculators, and more, our self-serve tools integrate with your billing portal to seamlessly explain bill and rate changes to your customers. All while recommending actions and offers that will improve their savings.

Brillion Fulfill

Streamline your program delivery and rebate reimbursements with Brillion Fulfill applications. Track program participation and energy savings while giving customers the real-time status updates they're asking for. Our configurable suite of tools is purpose-built to streamline your operations and improve the effectiveness of your energy efficiency and demand-side management initiatives.

Powered by Brillion's data insights engine.

At the core of every Brillion solution lies our data insights engine. It's what supercharges our customer engagement applications and turns utility data into actionable insights.

Integration

Pre-built connectors offer effortless integration with enterprise systems and third-party data sources.

Synthesis

Leverages customer, property, program, usage, and rate data to provide a seamless customer experience.

Intelligence

Our adaptive learning model continuously improves with every interaction to deliver optimal recommendations.

Ready to learn more about Brillion? Let's chat.

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