What it means to be a Sustainable Utility: Forum 2022 keynote speaker spotlight

An interview with Jennifer Montague, senior VP and CCO at NiSource

By Sara Patnaude

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I recently had the pleasure of sitting down with Jennifer Montague, senior VP and chief customer officer (CCO) at NiSource. We talked about:

- Her upcoming keynote at E Source Forum 2022
- The exciting future of the utility industry
- How a PB&J sandwich is the perfect analogy for the utility-customer relationship

Make sure to register for the Forum and join Jennifer, along with some of her utility peers, at our opening plenary session on Wednesday, September 14.

More about Jennifer Montague

Jennifer Montague serves as the senior VP and CCO at NiSource. She's responsible for setting direction and managing a leadership team focused on customer experiences in the areas of customer care centers, customer insights and marketing, billing and payments, and new business across six states. She joined

the company as the VP of communications and external affairs at Northern Indiana Public Service Co. (NIPSCO) in November 2018. Before that, Jennifer had nearly three decades of customer operations, branding, communications, and marketing experience in roles with ComEd and BP Amoco. She earned a bachelor's degree in quantitative economics and feminist studies from Stanford University and an MBA from the University of Chicago.

Sara Patnaude. You've been in the energy industry for nearly three decades. What excites you most about the future of the industry?

Jennifer Montague. I feel like, as an industry, we're on the precipice of really exciting change. And that gives us an opportunity to look closer at some really innovative solutions. I'm truly excited about some of the big challenges ahead and the process of finding ways to fix them to drive that change.

For example, I see big financial impacts coming due to severe weather changes. Utilities have to be resilient and make sure that they've spent the time and money hardening the grid to prevent outages or gas pipeline disruptions. While some utilities have done that well, some haven't. We also need to spend a lot of time thinking about supply and demand and generation. At NiSource, we've done that work and have been contemplating the process of shutting down our coal-fired plants at NIPSCO and transitioning to renewables while having other forms of generation available too.

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But what's the most exciting to me—and probably nearest and dearest to my heart since it's what I focus on every day—is our customers. More specifically, our customers' preferences and how they're evolving. There's a lot of rapid technological change that customers have come to expect and want. We live in a world now where we want what we want when and how we want it. Some customers want green power. Some customers don't care. Some customers want to interact with us directly, while others prefer digital methods. NiSource, along with many other companies, is investing in new technology such as chatbots, mobile apps, and a text-to-pay option to support a more self-sufficient customer. On the other hand, there will always be some customers that don't want that. Many customers still want to see a live person at a walk-up facility, right?

So I think the thing that I'm most excited about is the fact that we have all different kinds of customers, and as utilities, it's our job to serve them all. And we need to figure out the best way to do that with their unique preferences in this rapid technological change we're in. We're never going to be like Amazon. And I don't want

us to be! The pressure is there but I think it's ridiculous for our industry to aim for that. Nobody can be like Amazon. But what Amazon has done for our industry is it's changed how customers think about—and what they expect of—in terms of service. So in that aspect, we have to be open and take those changes into consideration as we develop our new technology offerings.

SP. What does being a Sustainable Utility mean to you and NiSource?

JM. Sustainability is a broad category that encompasses more than just protecting our environment. At NiSource, we've been interpreting sustainability as putting people at the center of everything we do: our customers, our employees, our business partners, and the communities we serve. The decisions that we make have a lasting impact on people's lives, and we're committed to sustainability that comes in many forms.

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Sustainability includes a big focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion. We often consider, "How do we ensure our workforces reflect the communities that we serve?" And, "Are we being intentional about working with diverse suppliers?" Sustainability is also about a positive experience for our customers, making sure that we're providing beneficial programs, multiple billing options, and other services that meet the needs of our diverse population.

And, of course, the focus that most people think of when they think of sustainability: cleaner, reliable, and affordable energy options for customers today and for generations to come. The economy is decarbonizing and accelerating fast, and we know that our natural gas and electric services have long-term roles in that future energy model.

Overall, sustainability is really a holistic approach, and it's a future that requires everyone in the energy space to do our part to achieve it.

SP. NiSource has been a part of the E Source family for a long time. How does that partnership impact the service NiSource provides to its customers?

JM. Our partnership with E Source has helped us—and continues to help us—in a variety of ways. Ethnographic research studies performed with E Source have helped us better understand our customers' expectations from us as their utility provider. We've also turned to E Source to help our team journey-map the customer experience, including some long-term journey mapping for new business, as well as the entirety of our NiSource territory. E Source has also helped us evaluate new technology options that we've been able to incorporate into our long-term customer and digital strategy.

All of this work we've accomplished has been extremely useful to help better understand what our customers need and expect from us. We've been able to build a better tool kit and make effective recommendations for the business. And while those recommendations for the business come with a cost, the insights from our partnership have helped us prioritize and make better investments that will improve the customer experience and positively impact customer satisfaction.

SP. We're thrilled to have you as our opening keynote speaker at the Forum this year. What can attendees expect from your presentation? Is there anything you can share with us?

JM. I look forward to speaking at the Forum this year and connecting with others in the utility space. I plan to share some of the transformational journey that NiSource has taken over the past two years and how we've been holistic about the ways we can improve the customer experience and reduce customer costs. We've put a lot of time into improving our foundation in terms of our interactions with customers. For example, we've made a lot of improvements to our contact center, billing systems, and back-office systems. And I think all of these things really help improve the foundation. Some of it's like going back to basics, but because we've been able to do that, it has not only helped us save money but also allowed us to create a more positive customer experience and I can't wait to share even more with attendees next month at the Forum.

SP. And, finally and maybe most importantly, if you were a sandwich, what kind would you be and why?

JM. It's kind of silly, but I'd have to say a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and that's because it's so efficient. It's a high source of protein, a good source of energy, it can be made quickly, and the ingredients have a long shelf life! But what I really like the most about it is that it represents comfort and safety. And that's what we provide for our customers every day in this industry: safe, reliable, electric, and gas service for our customers' comfort and safety.

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