Use data and collaboration to ensure the success of your crisis communications plan

By Luba Abrams

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Key takeaways

- Increasingly severe and frequent storms make using data more important than ever to enable your communications team to provide customers with fast and accurate information.
- Reliable energy and effective communication influence customer satisfaction. Encouraging collaboration between operations and communications teams will help your utility build customer trust and satisfaction during severe weather.
- Foster a shared understanding of your utility's crisis communication plan so utility leaders and operations, communications, and contact center staff can deliver a cohesive storm response.
- E Source has the tools and resources to help your utility prepare for storms, develop more-accurate estimated times of restoration (ETRs), and design effective outage communications campaigns.

It can be challenging to coordinate the flow of information among utility departments in the face of a severe weather event. Storms are becoming more prevalent and severe because of climate change, and teams must collaborate to deliver accurate and prompt communications to customers.

Let E Source help you improve crisis communications at your utility

With a subscription to the E Source Corporate Communications Service and access to the E Source Storm

Insight solution, your communications and operations teams can:

- Use data to inform their decision-making before, during, and after a storm
- Find the most effective channel, frequency, and messaging for customer communications
- Use E Source Energy AdVision to get examples of successful crisis communications campaigns

Fill out this short form to start a conversation about your needs and how we can help.

The first step is to have a crisis communications plan in place. Supporting your plan with predictive data analytics, delivered by E Source Data Science, can help with:

- Decision-making
- Message accuracy and timeliness
- Resource planning

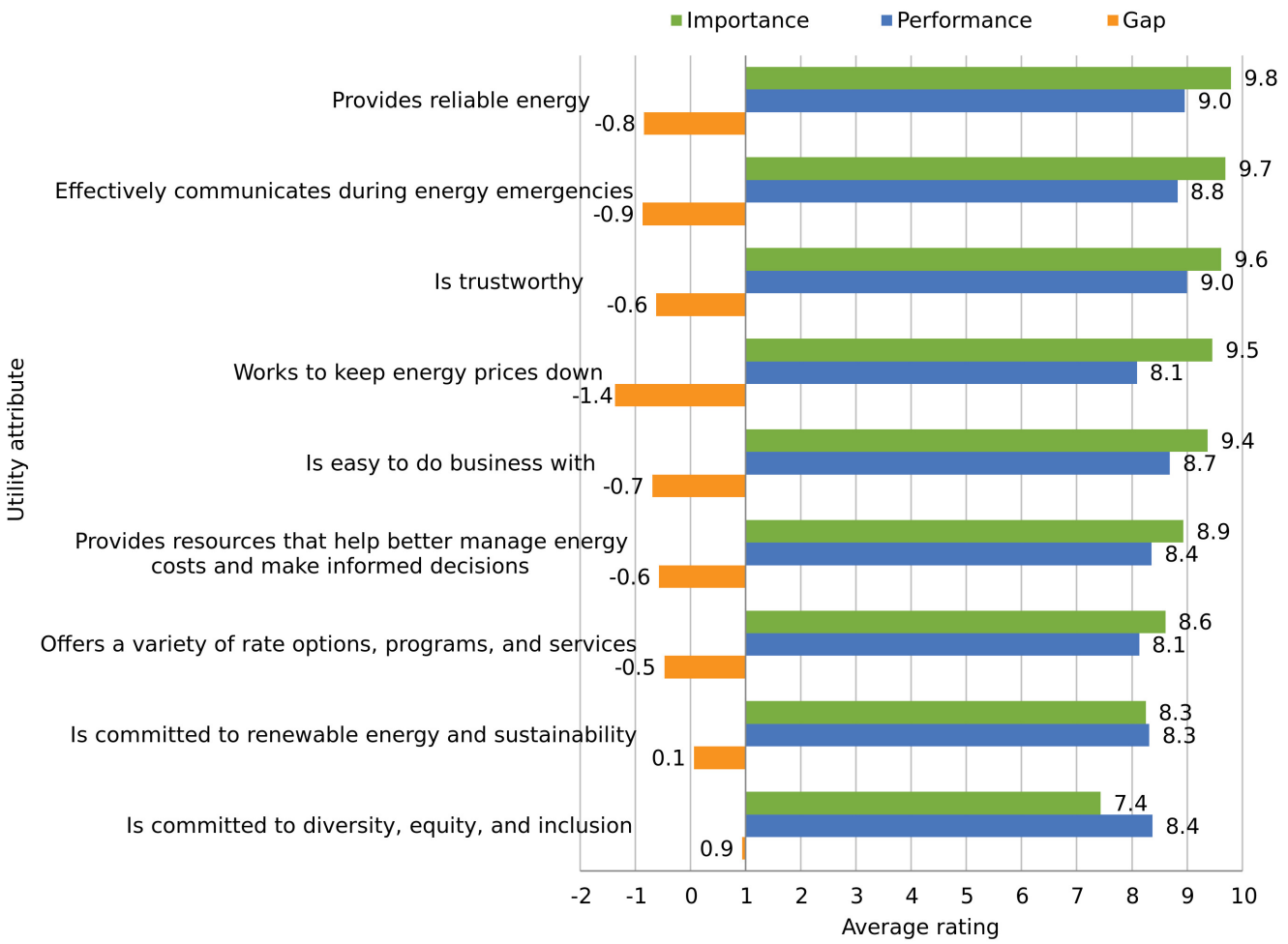
And adding market research data, software tools, and guidance from the E Source Corporate Communications Service can help your operations and communications teams deliver more-effective outage communications to affected customers.

Customers want utilities to improve reliability and outage communications

According to data from the E Source 2023 Business Customer Satisfaction Study, "Provides reliable energy" and "Effectively communicates during energy emergencies" are two of the most important attributes large business customers look for in their utility. But our data shows gaps between how important those attributes are to customers and the utility's performance in those areas. Our research on small and midsize business customers showed similar trends. These gaps highlight an opportunity for utilities to improve their outage communications with these customer groups.

Utility attribute gap analysis

E Source survey data shows that utilities have room to improve when it comes to communications and reliability.



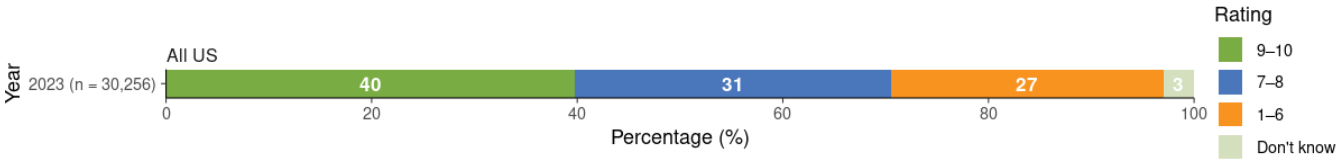
© E Source (2023 Large Business Customer Satisfaction Study) **Base:** Large business customers included in the 2023 study (n = 649) **Question S1_1:** How important is it for a utility to have the following attributes? **Question S1_2:** Now please rate how well your utility performs. **Notes:** We asked respondents to rate importance and performance on a 10-point scale, where 1 was the lowest score and 10 was the highest. We calculated gap values using the full data set for importance and performance not the rounded numbers shown in the chart.

Utilities can also improve their outage communications with residential customers. Data from the E Source Residential Customer Insights Center shows that only 40% of electric and gas customers strongly agree that their utility communicates effectively.

Residential customers' perceptions of the effectiveness of their utility's communications

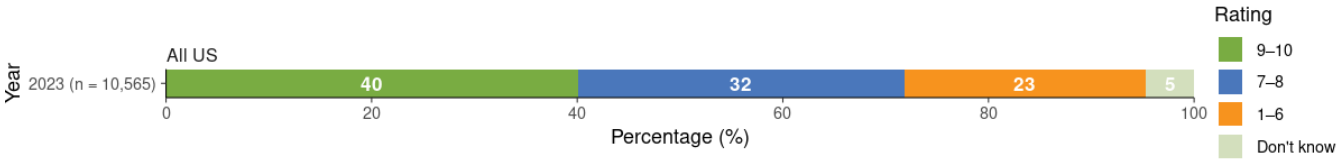
Less than half of residential utility customers strongly agree that their utility communicates effectively with them.

Electric or dual-fuel customers



© E Source (US Residential Customer Insights Center; data from the Claritas Energy Behavior Track survey). Base: Respondents who are customers of electricity or dual-fuel providers. Question A10_9: How much do you personally agree or disagree with the following statements about your electricity provider for your primary residence? [Filtered] (Grouped) Communicates effectively with me Note: Respondents used a scale of 1–10, where 1 means strongly disagree and 10 means strongly agree. Percentages shown in the charts reflect weighted data; sample sizes (n) are based on unweighted data. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. Use caution when sample size falls below 30.

Gas customers



© E Source (US Residential Customer Insights Center; data from the Claritas Energy Behavior Track survey). Base: Respondents who are customers of natural gas providers. Question A19_9: How much do you personally agree or disagree with the following statements about your natural gas provider for your primary residence? [Filtered] (Grouped) Communicates effectively with me Note: Respondents used a scale of 1–10, where 1 means strongly disagree and 10 means strongly agree. Percentages shown in the charts reflect weighted data; sample sizes (n) are based on unweighted data. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding. Use caution when sample size falls below 30.

Collaboration between operations and communications teams is the key to an effective storm response

While the operations team is working to restore customers during an energy emergency, they don't always have a plan for keeping the communications team updated on their progress. They may not know when they'll be able to safely restore power or how to distribute resources to help the most customers, so they don't provide prompt updates. This ambiguity leaves customers confused and frustrated. The faster and more accurate your outage communications are, the more satisfied your customers will be.

E Source Storm Insight: An intuitive, visual tool

With this solution, you can:

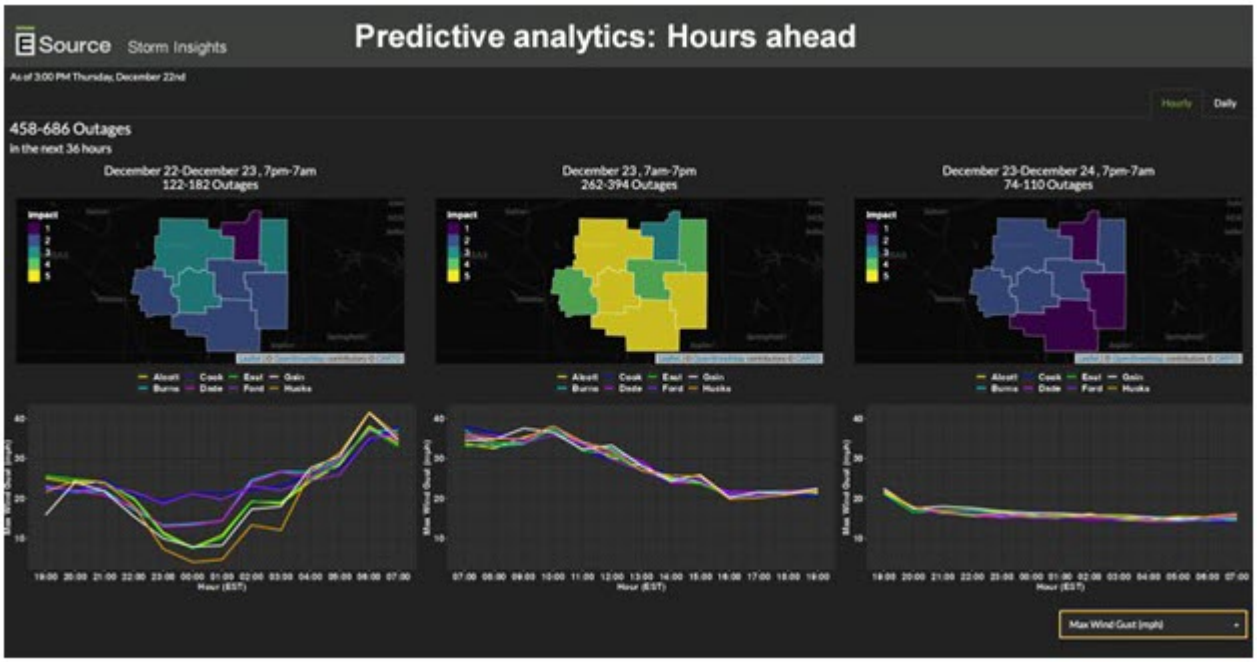
- Pan, zoom, and view aggregated information at varying resolutions and system levels
- Set predicted outage thresholds to automatically trigger notifications and visual warnings
- Give your storm-response teams access to distribution system outage predictions up to five days before a storm event
- View outage-prediction trends

Imagine if your operations teams could provide best- and worst-case outage scenarios in advance of storms so that the communications team could message customers quickly and accurately. With the E Source Storm Insight solution, utilities can predict storm-induced outages and plan where to send crews to streamline restoration efforts. The AI-powered tool combines your utility's unique data, including outage history and

infrastructure, with E Source's own derived data layers for spatial and vegetation conditions, as well as industry-leading weather forecast data. Learn more about Storm Insight in our blog post How Hurricane Idalia can inspire utilities to take a data-driven approach to outage prediction.

Sample predictive analytics data from the Storm Insight tool

Storm Insight predicts expected daily system-wide outages up to five days before a storm hits and hourly location-specific outages up to 36 hours before. This data can help you and your customers appropriately prepare for upcoming storm-induced outages.



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How Alabama Power uses Storm Insight

We spoke with Shane Powell, data analytics and innovation manager at Alabama Power, about how the utility uses Storm Insight. Alabama Power experiences about 70,000 outages annually, with the average outage lasting 2 hours and 20 minutes. During significant storm events, outages can last much longer. During storms, the utility uses Storm Insight to estimate the personnel and time it needs to repair damage and restore power.

The collaborative relationship between Alabama Power and E Source has helped evolve the analytics over time. The analytics have shifted from using historic averages of restoration rates per personnel to the current-state data science model. The current-state model quantifies dynamic effects to promote more-accurate ETRs.

Alabama Power has been capturing "gut feel" ETRs from local general managers and comparing those with the model's outputs. The predictive model is currently 85%–90% accurate, while instincts can be wrong by a factor of days.

Optimize customer communications. The next step in optimizing Alabama Power's storm response will be using Storm Insight predictions to inform customer communications. Alabama Power currently enrolls customers in outage text messages sent via an in-house outage management system interface. But the utility uses gut-feeling ETRs to inform those messages. The communications team is continually refining predictions and sending updates to customers. It's easy to overwhelm customers when ETRs are constantly changing. Powell hopes to harness the power of data science to improve the outage customer experience—Storm Insight is 95% accurate within an hour of the storm.

According to Powell:

> Customers get to the point where they don't care. They want to know the real answer at the outset and then when the lights are back on. If we tell them it will be 48 hours, they don't mind if it is 46 or 42 hours. Customers want to know more about blue sky days when lights go out. That is when they care about if it is going to be 30 minutes or 3 hours so they can figure out whether to eat out or whether they can just delay their next meal.

Improve response and resource planning. Another goal for Alabama Power is to roll out Storm Insight across the organization to help with storm response planning. The first 85% of restoration efforts usually happen quickly after a storm. But as most utilities do, Alabama Power saves the hardest hit cases for when it has the most resources. Storm Insight can help the utility organize its resources most effectively to restore that final 15% of customers.

Data science can optimize storm response decision-making

Check out our blog post Data-driven storm response for a reliable and resilient grid to learn how E Source helped PPL Electric Utilities use AI and machine learning to optimize its grid investments and storm response decisions.

The tool also helps Alabama Power avoid public relations issues related to storms and resource planning. Having accurate predictions improves the utility's resource planning accuracy. Suppose a major weather event occurs and the utility isn't prepared. In that case, it has to ask for additional resources and restoration takes longer.

If the utility predicts a massive event and nothing materializes, the public criticizes the big bill produced by a small storm. But the worst-case scenario is when there's a big bill *and* a long outage. Alabama Power uses the Storm Insight tool to show historical storm data and how that informed the utility's decision-making process.

To learn more about how utilities use data to prepare their teams for storm season, watch the recording of the E Source webinar Storms are coming: The power of predictive analytics for storm response, restoration, and outage communications.

How you can coordinate restoration with communications

Pairing Storm Insight with a comprehensive crisis communication plan will help your utility effectively communicate during energy emergencies and meet or exceed customers' expectations.

We recommend reviewing your crisis communication plan with other utility departments. This will help coordinate your approach to restoring power and keeping customers informed. Include the following strategies in your outage communications plan.

Start by sharing information on emergency preparedness with customers. Help them understand what they can do to prepare for severe weather events. For example, explain how to create an emergency kit, craft a family communication plan, and stay informed.

Find inspiration from winning communications campaigns

E Source Energy AdVision contains thousands of examples of utility marketing, advertising, and communications campaigns. We populate this database with content submitted to the annual E Source Utility Ad Awards Contest. These submissions include information such as:

- Campaign background and goals
- Strategy and tactics
- Timeline
- Target market
- Results

Form local partnerships. Build trust and make sure your communications reach the right customers by working with community groups to align your messaging. Important partners include local community organizations and emergency management agencies.

Prepare key messages for utility leadership and contact center staff. Make sure senior leaders are prepared to discuss all possible scenarios with employees, customers, and the media. And give your contact center staff the same key messages and information they can share with customers.

Prepare your lineworkers to interact with customers. During a severe weather situation, lineworkers are often the face of your utility to customers. Make sure they understand not only how to be technically proficient but also how to help customers who are upset or frightened.

Evaluate the effectiveness of your outage communications with your operations team. After a storm occurs, review what worked well and what you can improve in your response to the emergency. Plan for how your teams can collaborate more effectively in the future.
