

## Emergencies and Outages Don't Always Happen 9 to 5



Tornado season is winding down and we find ourselves in the heart of hurricane season. Winter will be here before we know it. Whether you work at a small municipal utility providing water, electric and sewer services or are part of a multi-state investor-owned utility company, there are always circumstances that can wreak havoc on any sized organization. What sets you apart is how quickly and attentively you handle them.

Ron Brown of PwC's governance, risk and compliance practice said that utilities have been faced with a barrage of extreme weather-related events and security issues around technology. "Utilities should move aggressively from a defensive responsive capability to a more offensive, prepared stance regarding events that can have prolonged impact on their ability to generate, transmit, distribute and provide critical customer and internal business services."

Emergency conditions change the game and can affect thousands of people. This might involve restoring service after an ice storm, a vehicle knocking a telephone pole into a transformer, a construction back-hoe digging up an underground cable, or a tree limb dropping a live wire in someone's back yard. Unfortunately these events don't always happen when your customer service contact/call center is fully staffed.

When an emergency presents itself, utilities should expect that their customers want to speak with a live person. They want to understand the status, share essential and hyper-local information, and be reassured the utility is taking immediate steps to correct the situation. If you are staffing a small team of agents led by a supervisor or two in the middle of the night, responding to a sudden influx of frantic calls in your service territory can be challenging and expensive and can have long-term negative implications.

Utility companies have found success by outsourcing their after-hours calls to a third-party contact/call center that has access to on-demand staff. The result for your company? Delivering seamless service to customers 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This partnership not only reduces operating costs and relieves complex management functions and staffing issues, but also improves overall customer satisfaction scores.

Large and small utilities will have different outsourcing needs. Large companies will want to build out a dedicated team of contact/call center agents, while small EMCs and municipalities will find that focusing on a smaller pool of agents and sharing a supervisor will meet their limited after-hour calls. A thorough needs-and-wants analysis will uncover your specific and unique regulatory requirements.

Weather and other emergency situations don't keep regular Monday thru Friday operating hours, so planning for these in advance will help drive your contact/call center business continuity. I'll be writing periodically on contact center best practices so would love to hear your thoughts on this topic and any other related topics.