

Modernizing the Contact Center:

A Guide for the Utilities Industry



Utility companies occupy a unique position when it comes to customer service. Because most consumers have little choice in their gas, electric, or water provider, competitive pressures are generally absent from the customer service equation. Instead, the pressure for utilities to improve customer experiences comes from other sources.

Regulatory standards for customer satisfaction and response times are set by public utility commissions (PUCs). Contact center costs are always a concern, and improved automation can not just slash operating expenses, but boost resilience during emergency situations. For U.S. states with deregulated electric and gas markets for business customers, competitive pressures are a concern as well, which makes modernizing contact centers even more important.

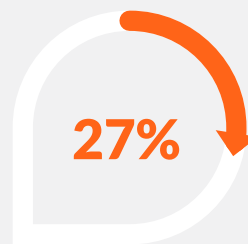
And, at the end of the day, we're all human. Who doesn't want to help customers keep the lights on and the water running, and elevate their company from tolerable to recommendable?



So why are so many utility contact centers stuck in the past, unable to deliver a high-quality, proactive customer experience? There are a few key reasons:

- Legacy systems and disjointed contact center solutions that hinder personalized engagement, self-service transactions, and seamless omni-channel experiences
- Lower AI maturity with less accurate understanding, owing to a shortage of skills and resources
- Difficulty scaling contact center staff to handle seasonal spikes, weather events, and unexpected outages
- Rising customer expectations fueled by the “Amazon Effect” and Gen AI services like ChatGPT and Gemini
- Competing investment demands, such as infrastructure modernization and sustainability initiatives





TIME TO FLIP THE SCRIPT

Only 27% of customers think self-service or automated support (like ChatGPT or AI-powered chatbots) can deliver as good of a customer experience as humans.³

Modern Table-Stakes Customer Service Demands for Utilities

According to an oft-quoted finding from Accenture, each year the average customer spends just eight minutes digitally interacting with their utility and about 11 minutes with a representative. Half of the customers surveyed had zero interactions.¹ While this chestnut dates back to 2016, even if this time has doubled or tripled since then, that still leaves utilities with very little opportunity to impress customers with ease-filled interactions.

Compounding this challenge is that most people don't really want to contact customer service. One survey found 43% of customers said they'd rather clean a toilet than call for support.² From apathetic customer service agents to lackluster automated support, they've been burned in the past and have many things they'd rather do.

¹Greentech Media, "[Customers Spend 8 Minutes Per Year Interacting Online with Their Utility](#)," Oct. 27, 2016

²Shep Hyken, [2024 ACA Study: Achieving Customer Amazement](#)

³Ibid.



How can utility companies fight these perceptions and wow customers, instead of frustrating them — all while saving on costs? The following customer service capabilities have become “must-haves” in our digital-first, automation-fueled world.



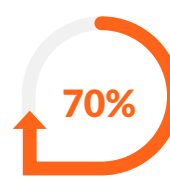
PROACTIVE CUSTOMER COMMUNICATION

Your intelligent virtual assistant (IVA) system should allow customers to select their preferred channel for outage and other notifications. It should enable custom greetings to immediately share critical information with callers or chatters.

The challenge: Siloed systems make it difficult to orchestrate expedient notifications or personalize IVA messages based on the customer’s service area and needs.



of surveyed utility consumers weren’t aware of their energy provider’s assistance programs.⁴



were interested in notifications for impending high bills, but only 15% were offered this service.



PERSONALIZATION

Today’s customers expect companies to personalize experiences, especially when it saves time. A best-in-class IVA can identify customers based on the number they are calling from, which speeds identity verification, allows for personalized outage notifications and program messages, and enables quick proactive service (such as recognizing that a bill is due and offering payment services).

The challenge: IVAs that aren’t well-integrated with your CIS may not have the capability to recognize customers, pull up relevant information, or track interactions to provide context in the future.



MORE ROBUST SELF-SERVICE

Few people contact their utility unless they’re facing a life change, billing issue, or problem that threatens their power, water, or heat. Best-in-class IVAs with superior understanding and workflow orchestration can provide proactive, ease-filled, and fast service, which improves customer service and helps your utility scale contact center operations and reduce costs.

The challenge: IVAs with subpar understanding or that are challenged by background noise, complex phrases, accents, and multiple languages have difficulty resolving intents. And those with poor integration capabilities may offer minimal transaction types or personalization.

⁴Energy Central, “Customers Don’t Speak Kilowatt Hours’ - But Utilities Can Talk Their Language,” August 10, 2021



OMNICHANNEL OMNISCIENCE

While customers may favor certain channels, they'll often use what works best at that moment. It's critical to offer a consistent, streamlined, and personalized service no matter how they are contacting your company.

The challenge: Siloed contact center automation systems that result in a disjointed experience and disparate data makes it challenging to glean critical operational and customer insights.



SEAMLESS LIVE AGENT SERVICE

More complex calls will still end up with live voice and chat agents. The right IVA can streamline these contacts with a warm handoff that reduces the need for customers to verify identity and repeat their intent, saving both agents and customers time. An IVA with Gen AI capabilities can also save agents time and help support them in the moment with contact summaries and conversation and resolution assists.

The challenge: The inability to streamline handoff and to use IVA's data and machine learning capabilities inhibits improvements in live agent knowledge and workloads.



RISING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS

94% of customers said they most valued convenience in 2024, compared to 84% in 2021.⁵

BEST-IN-CLASS IVA USE CASES FOR UTILITIES

A modern IVA should be able to self-service these use cases for utility customers without escalation.

- ID & authentication
- Intent capture and routing
- Outage notification
- Outage reporting
- Bill payments
- Start/Stop/Move service
- Proactive paperless enrollment
- Payment arrangement

⁵Shep Hyken, [2024 ACA Study: Achieving Customer Amazement](#)

Modern contact center automation for utilities: A vendor checklist

Putting together your must-have and nice-to-have vendor checklist for evaluating IVA solutions can be challenging when advances in AI are moving so fast — and while you're likely in the midst of modernizing other systems which may integrate with the IVA.

Therefore, while there are specific features to look for, a thorough vetting of IVA vendors should also take partnership strength into consideration. Will the IVA vendor provide hands-on help as your tech stack, customers, and regulations evolve over time? How long have they been in the conversational AI space, and what innovations have they brought to it? What's on their roadmap?



With those considerations in mind, use this checklist to get started on your contact center automation journey:



VERIFIABLE RECORD AND EXPERTISE

Look for a vendor with at least 10 years of innovation in the conversational AI space, including evidence of success like patents, industry awards, and long-standing customers.

Benefits: Trust that you're partnering with a company that values innovation and can navigate and leverage future advances in AI, keeping your solution relevant as technology evolves.



SPECIFIC SOLUTIONS FOR UTILITIES

Look for vendors that offer pre-trained AI models tailored for utilities, as well as in-house expertise, understanding of regulatory requirements, and peer case studies.

Benefits: Demonstration that the company has invested in utilities use cases and that it has experts who understand your unique needs — and who can help you rise to future challenges.





BEST-IN-CLASS CONVERSATIONAL AI

Look for a solution that expertly and seamlessly blends AI technologies with human expertise for superior understanding and intent processing.

Benefits: Out-of-the-gate accuracy, exceptional understanding, increased customer ease, and continual machine learning.



LOW-CODE APPLICATIONS

Look for a vendor that has done much of the work upfront via low-code, easily implementable modules that get you moving quickly, whether you're working on your initial implementation or adding channels and other functionality in the future.

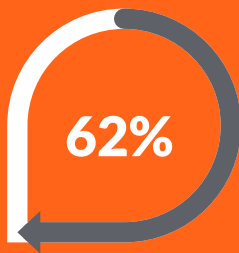
Benefits: Faster time to market and more time to focus on your customized needs.



HANDS-ON HELP WITH INTEGRATIONS

Look for a solution that goes beyond typical DIY, document-guided integrations and that instead offers hands-on help and expertise.

Benefits: Well-maintained integrations that simply work from implementation, as well as assistance with less-common or legacy system integrations.



expect AI technologies to become the primary mode of customer service in the future.⁶ (Ring Central)



⁶Shep Hyken, [2024 ACA Study: Achieving Customer Amazement](#)



Ask about these common IVA integrations:

- Utility customer information systems (CIS)
- Appointment setting software
- Payment processing
- Telephony systems
- Contact center software
- Business intelligence/ analytics suites



PERSONALIZATION

Look for a system that can personalize the customer experience via integration with your utility customer information systems (CIS). (While this is similar to the prior bullet, it's so critical it deserves its own mention.)

Benefits: This eases identity verification, ensures outage alerts are relevant, enables proactive IVA suggestions (such as paying an upcoming bill), and helps maintain a record of interactions.



A CONNECTED OMNICHANNEL EXPERIENCE

Look for an IVA that can carry context and personalization across voice, chat, social, email, and SMS, and that can even smooth the handoff of interactions to live agents.

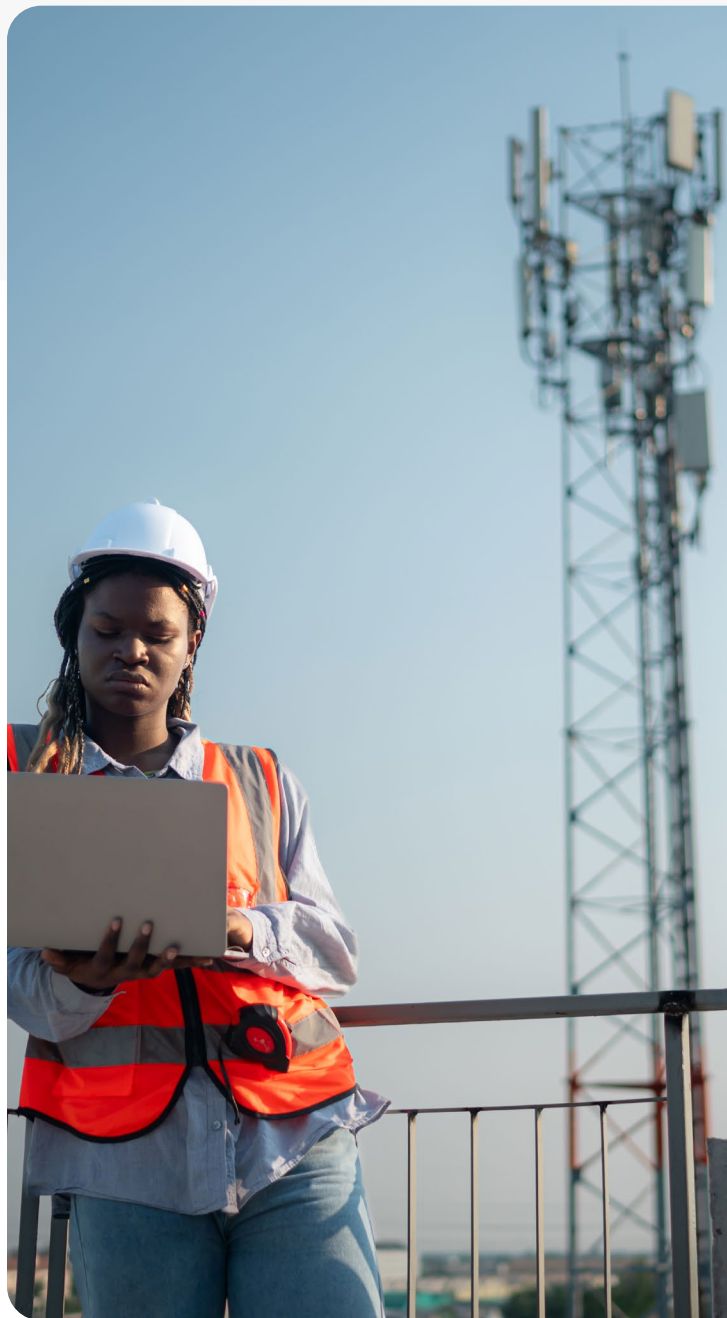
Benefits: A single IVA for multiple channels is easier to manage. Customers receive a faster, more consistent experience with fewer repetitive questions.



PROACTIVE SMS AND EMAIL ALERTS

Look for an IVA that can support proactive emergency, planned outage, and other notifications.

Benefits: Customers get the information they need quickly — even before they realize they need it — and increases your utility company's transparency. It also helps reduce live agent contact volume during peak times for scalable and resilient contact center operations.





Take a peek under the hood

To learn more about the technology innovation that goes into creating a best-in-class IVA with superior AI and understanding, [download our free guide](#).



EASE OF IVA DIALOG CHANGES

Look for a solution that allows simple updates to your IVA dialogs to share critical information, as well as ensures the right customers receive the right messages at the right time.

Benefits: Customers get critical questions about outages answered immediately with ease, while the contact center can share proactive information about things like energy conservation or billing changes.



MULTILINGUAL SUPPORT

Look for a solution that can recognize a customer's preferred language (via integration with your CIS and language recognition).

Benefits: More equitable service for all customers and increased ability to use self-service for demographically diverse areas.



GEN AI INNOVATION

Look for a vendor that offers Gen AI innovation with guardrails, such as assisting agents with summaries and helping them handle unexpected customer inquiries by drawing upon your own data to provide accurate answers.

Benefits: More agent minutes saved, more consistent summaries, and more questions answered without further escalation up the chain.

Happy customers, happy agents

While modern IVAs can create noteworthy and ease-filled customer experiences and help you save on contact center operational costs, they can also optimize your live agents.

- Warm transfers that ease customer frustration from repetitive questions and shortens Average Handle Time (AHT).
- Gen AI assists with interaction summaries and tough questions save time and increase consistency.
- Human agents who help the IVA with low-confidence utterances or tasks that require human decision-making behind the scenes offer new opportunities for agents.
- Multilingual interfaces for behind-the-scenes agents empower your staff to help people, regardless of language.



Focus on Data and Optimization

One particular challenge for utility companies using legacy systems is a lack of data on both customers and their service interactions. Modern IVAs that integrate with your CIS and contact center software, as well as unify multiple contact channels, bring more consistent data.

Your IVA's analytical platform should provide both high-level analytics and enable deep dives into specific interactions with PII automatically redacted. You should also be able to customize reports and, if you wish, integrate this data back into your business intelligence platform or data warehouse for further analysis. With this data, you will gain an in-depth view of customers that goes far beyond your CSAT and Customer Effort Scores (CES). You can track trending topics, analyze their sentiment, and find new ways to optimize your IVA.

Of particular importance is how data can fuel continuous optimization. An IVA is never a set-it-and-forget-it system. The AI can be further trained and fine-tuned. New intents may be added. You can discover upstream issues that can be addressed to prevent future problems.

The key to continual optimization is finding a partner that's invested in your success long beyond implementation. You should have a dedicated account management team who meets with your own core team regularly to share the insights they've gleaned from your analytics, strategic foresight, and optimization ideas.

Interactions: The IVA of choice for utilities

Interactions, a leader in the IVA space for more than two decades, offers dedicated AI models and expert support for utility companies. With our patented blend of AI and human intelligence, Interactions IVAs perform with 97% accuracy and save our clients millions of dollars each year.

After upgrading its contact center automation to Interactions, Arizona power utility [Salt River Project \(SRP\)](#) doubled its self-service rates and boasted a 48% containment rate for outage notifications.

OUR UTILITIES CLIENTS HAVE EXPERIENCED:

45%

increase in
self-service

95%

success rate
for payments



CONCLUSION

Your utility customers may not contact you often. But when they do, it's important. Whether they're experiencing an outage or need to negotiate payments for high bills, your customers need to keep the gas on, the water flowing, and the lights shining bright.

With Interactions IVA, you can ensure that every conversation they have with your company is efficient and impactful. With accurate, proactive, and personalized self-service, you can transform customer interactions into exceptional experiences while significantly reducing costs.

Learn more about Interactions can change how your utility serves customers.

[Visit our Utilities web page](#) or [reach out for a demo today.](#)

+95%

payments processed
for utility clients

+95%

authentication
success

+90%

inquiries
resolved by self
service





interactions

ABOUT INTERACTIONS

Interactions provides Intelligent Virtual Assistants that seamlessly assimilate Conversational AI and human understanding to enable businesses to engage with their customers in highly productive and satisfying conversations. With flexible products and solutions designed to meet the growing demand for unified, omnichannel customer care, Interactions is delivering unprecedented improvements in the customer experience and significant cost savings for some of the largest brands in the world. Founded in 2004, Interactions is headquartered in Franklin, Massachusetts with additional offices worldwide.

For more information about Interactions, contact us:

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