



MEMBER FOCUS

EVOLVING TO MEET CHANGING CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS: GRU

by John Egan

Meals by mail. Anything from Amazon delivered in a day, maybe two. Skip the lines and catch a movie on a streaming service. Customer expectations around convenience continue to evolve, a trend that pre-dated the pandemic but was accelerated by it. Across all industries, technology plays a critical role in enabling more customer-centric service. As the expectations of its customers evolve, Gainesville Regional Utilities is also evolving its customer service options.

"There's no line online," Kinn'zon Hutchinson, chief customer officer at Gainesville Regional Utilities (GRU), said in a recent interview. "We are expanding our use of technology to become more customer friendly."

"We are flexing to give our customers better service the way they define it," he continued. "Customers expect to do business with us online, without having a phone conversation. We're not in business to put customers in a box."

GRU Investing Millions to Enhance Customer Experience

Like all public power utilities, GRU continually makes investments in its system and service models. GRU is investing north of \$31 million to install a new customer information system (CIS), a project expected to go live February 2023. Hutchinson said it's too early to know all the benefits the new CIS will bring customers, though better-quality answers to customer questions likely is one significant benefit.

GRU is also developing a web portal that allows customers to view their account information on the go. Delivering that service, as well as potentially offering a prepaid metering service, is anticipated upon completion of the utility's advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) project, on which it is spending at least \$80 million. The AMI project, now in its first phase, is expected to be complete by 2024.

And, most importantly for the utility's environmentally aware customers, GRU's customer communications have highlighted that nearly 30 percent of electricity produced is from renewable sources. That's significantly higher than the state's 3 percent average. A lot of that clean electricity comes from a biomass plant that GRU had contracted with years ago, at what turned out to be significantly higher than market prices. By buying out that contract in 2017, the utility is hoping to bring down some of the more historically high rates.

But again, in this customer-centric world, some portion of GRU's customer base doesn't mind paying a premium for clean electricity.

GRU had been using Opower's energy efficiency communications package, under which a select number of customers received monthly reports that compared their energy use to their neighbors. But after customers expressed concerns about the validity of those reports, GRU discontinued them.

"We're trying to increase collaboration, inside GRU with employees and outside with our customers, in order to deliver a world-class customer experience," Hutchinson said. He became chief customer officer in January 2021 after 11 years with the utility.

Changes Implemented During the Pandemic

Public health concerns caused GRU to close its lobby for several months at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, about 5,000 customers each month had been paying their monthly bills in person at the lobby. GRU needed to find a solution for these customers — and fast.

GRU responded by directing customers to drive-thru payment lanes as well as third-party payment kiosks at locations like Publix Super Markets and Western Union. It extended hours for its call centers to transact business. Customer use of GRU's online stop/start/move service, which had been in the market for years, surged. Call volumes went down but emails increased, Hutchinson reported.

Recognizing the devastating impact the pandemic had on customers' lives and jobs, GRU provided payment extensions for about 5,000 customers, about 5 percent of the overall customer population. Also, like many Florida public power utilities, GRU suspended all late fees and disconnections for nonpayment for several months in 2020 during the early stages of the pandemic.

The utility, to help keep the lights on for its most impacted customers, secured more than \$1 million in federal and state grants to pay down or pay off the electric bills of about 4,000 customers whose payments became delinquent.

Students at the University of Florida comprise nearly half of the utility's 100,000 electric customers.

Providing Services Around Customer Needs

To better respond to customer queries, either on the phone or in person in its lobby, GRU offered permanent full-time service representatives (CSRs) in order to retain their accumulated knowledge of policies and procedures, which enables them to provide customers with higher-quality service.

The utility also recently ramped up its GRU in the Neighborhood program and its energy surveys, under which GRU energy experts perform walk-through audits and offer advice on how to lower usage. In May 2022, GRU also raised to \$10,000 the amount of no-cost upgrades it will provide to income-qualified customers through its Low-Income Energy Efficiency Program Plus (LEEP Plus). It also opened that program to renters for the first time.

GRU's LEEP Plus offers income-qualified customers free home improvements that can lower their electric bill, improve comfort and reduce energy use.

Potential no-cost upgrades under the GRU LEEP Plus could include:

- Replacing or servicing central air conditioning and heating systems
- Repairing and sealing duct systems
- Installing additional insulation
- Replacing the water heater
- Upgrading electrical service panels
- Installing a programmable thermostat
- Weather stripping and caulking of doors and windows
- Providing up to 10 LEDs

"By going to where our customers live, we changed the dynamics of our customer interaction," said Hutchinson, a certified change-management practitioner with an MBA. "This is a good thing we want to continue."

The GRU executive recognizes that customer service is a journey, not a destination. As new customer expectations arise, GRU, like any good business, stands ready to evolve to meet the new expectations. ■