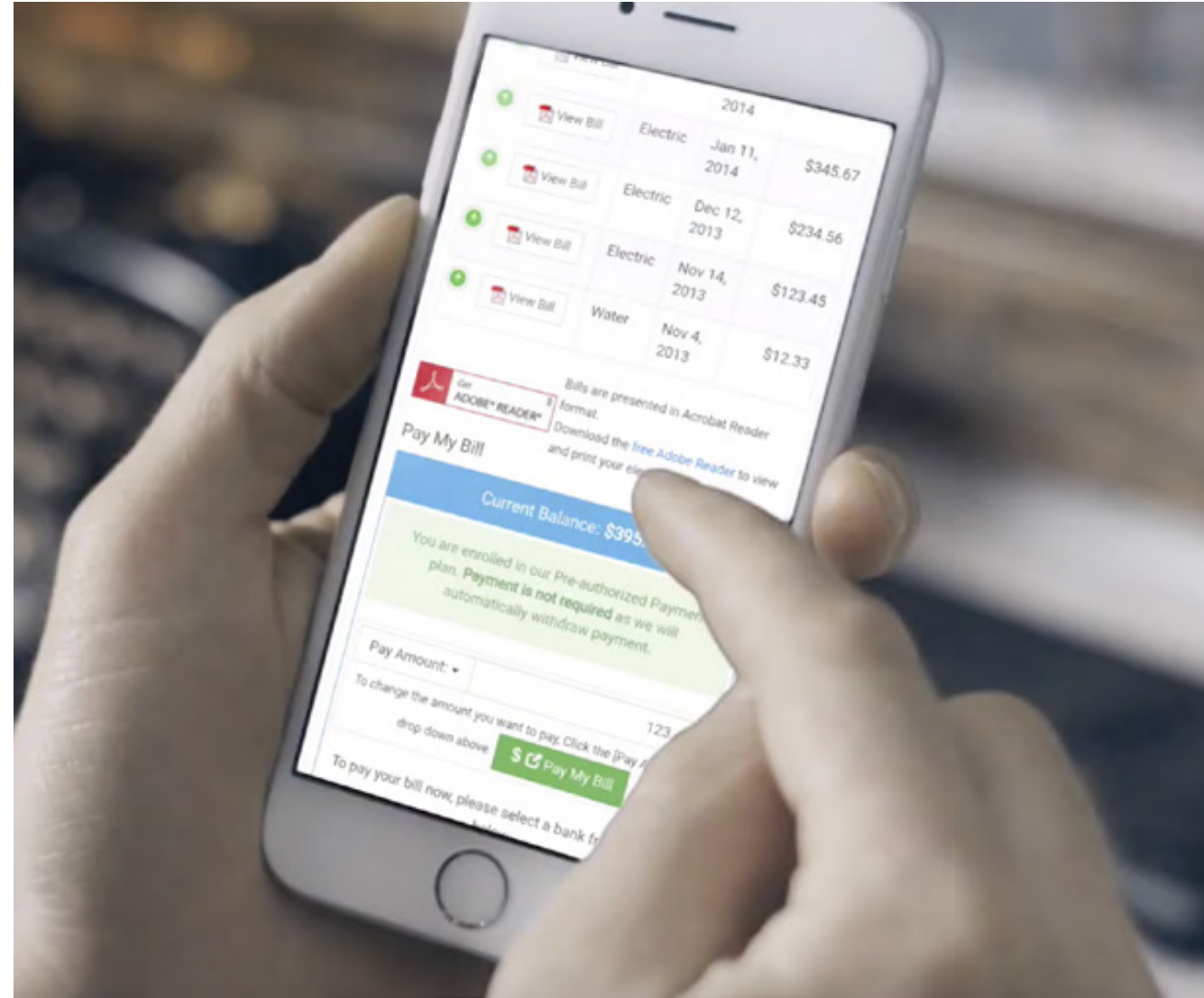# 5 Smart Technology Strategies For Successful Utilities

Smart Customers Want Smart Technologies

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The standard model for a utility providers customer service is outdated. Sending a paper bill once a month to your customers is no longer good enough. Whether you're an electric, gas or water utility provider, it's becoming more of a challenge to keep customers satisfied.

New-age challenges can come in multiple forms, from customer wait times, no notifications of power outages and even customer frustration stemming from utility management and the ability to reduce their bills. Customers are demanding an easier experience, and utility providers must meet these demands.

Customer service levels and customer expectations are not static, they are evolving month on month, year on year, and customers now expect a higher standard of service than ever before. Customers demand the ability to access everything they need on multiple platforms, from their mobile phones, to laptops, to other devices.

We live in a digital age and customers want to be managing their own accounts online, easily finding information and handling transactions and issues quickly and electronically.

73 percent of customers say that a company who values their time is one of the key factors to good customer service (Forrester, 2016).

To cater for these smarter customers, utility providers need to capitalize on smart technology. A perfect example of this would be a self-service customer portal specifically designed for utility providers. It will be able to integrate with current systems, while also being cost-effective and generating a positive ROI.

A customer portal will empower the customer by giving them the tools they need to access and manage their account, while at the same time removing strain on utility staff. This means superior customer service can be provided cost-effectively and easily.

To reinforce the above point, customer loyalty is positively impacted by reducing the customer's effort (HBR, 2017).

This ebook will outline five strategies utilities can utilize to improve their customer service.

strategy: **ONE**
Provide Self-Service Tools for Utility Customers

Utility providers should strive to make it as easy as possible for people to interact with them. They should consider giving customers the same kind of online self-service tools they have come to expect in dealing with financial institutions and other service organizations.

In fact, 90 percent of customers said they expect companies to offer an online portal for self-service (Microsoft, 2017).

Through a utility providers web portal, customers can use their device of choice to get paperless bills, sign up for pre-authorized payments, make changes to their account information and do much more - all at a few simple clicks of a button. By making access easy, transactions quick and accurate, and by giving people control over their own information, utilities provide better service and increase customer satisfaction.

One of the biggest customer complaints for utilities is the rising cost of bills. Utility providers have no control over energy costs, therefore there is little they can do to give their customers price-relief. However, they can give customers the tools to learn about their usage patterns, so they can understand what they are paying for and how to reduce those costs where possible.

With analytics comparing a consumer's utility usage to their local area, or their own from years previous, customers have the knowledge to invoke change to their consumption patterns and reduce usage. The same kind of analytics can be used to enable customers with environmental concerns to participate in energy conservation programs.

Many utility providers undertake surveys to measure customer satisfaction with their services. In fact, some utility providers are bound by government regulations to maintain defined levels of customer satisfaction. By giving customers easy-to-use tools to manage their utilities around the clock, utility providers can turn customers into energy partners and reach these targets.

strategy: **TWO**
Ensure The Utility Online Services Are Easily Accessible

Almost 80 percent of adults in the United States own a smartphone (PEW, 2018). Desktop and laptop computers are now the second most popular device. Following not too far behind in third place are tablets, with a projected 1.32 billion people owning them worldwide (Statista, 2018).

With the rising number of people owning a smart devices - phones, tablets, TVs and watches - customers expect fast, convenient and accessible services from utilities. An online customer service solution must feature responsive design, allowing it to be optimally displayed on any of these devices, making access to information and interaction easy.

With this kind of instant access customers realize true convenience, allowing them to pay bills quickly, avoid late penalty fees and much much more. Utility providers have the ability to 'push' automatic notifications to customers, informing them of due payments, service outages, energy usage threshold alerts and more.

Instant communication is important when coping with emergencies, or when dealing with time-sensitive government regulatory issues. Using tools such as automatic reminders and analytics provides instant communication that is important to customers.

strategy: THREE
Offer an Engaging, Intuitive and Informative Online Utility Experience

The implementation of a customer service web solution will not work if the customer doesn't feel inclined to use it. How a customer web portal looks and how well it works are both a reflection of a utility provider and the services it offers.

Over 90 percent of utility staff agreed that the utility industry was overdue for transformation and that utility operations were outdated (Itron, 2017); Offering an updated online experience is one of the first steps.

The look must be clean, modern and well organized. The slick looks must also be backed up with functionality and ease of use. Well-organized information, drop-down menus with pre-validated choices, simple navigation and overall good design will ensure that customers use the portal.

An inviting look, efficient interface, and the smooth functionality of a customer portal are all important tools in combating the widespread impression among customers that utility providers do not operate efficiently.

A feature-rich web portal that provides a superior customer experience is often the first point of contact for a customer, and is one important way for a utility to convey its commitment to efficiency, diversity and the latest technological solutions.

strategy: **FOUR**

Lower Call Volumes and Increase Customer Satisfaction

Utility providers today face a rising tide of call center volumes. Customers phone to change account information, to make queries about their bills, to get information about conservation programs, and much more.

Utility providers must decide to either increase staffing in their call centers (and increase costs) to meet the rising demand, or find alternative ways to respond to common customer queries and needs.

With the right web portal customers can manage their own accounts, sparing utility customer service representatives from having to key in information. Not only does this save the CSRs time, it reduces the likelihood of keyed-in errors from manual processes.

The customers would also have online access to information about their bills, usage, conservation programs, new utility initiatives and much more.

Customers increasingly looking after their own needs would reduce pressure on the call centers, allowing utility providers to devote resources to business areas where they are needed in order to improve the organization. In addition, resources saved from reduced call volumes can be reallocated to other important customer service initiatives.

There is a clear correlation between a utility provider delivering exceptional customer service and brand satisfaction (Microsoft, 2017).
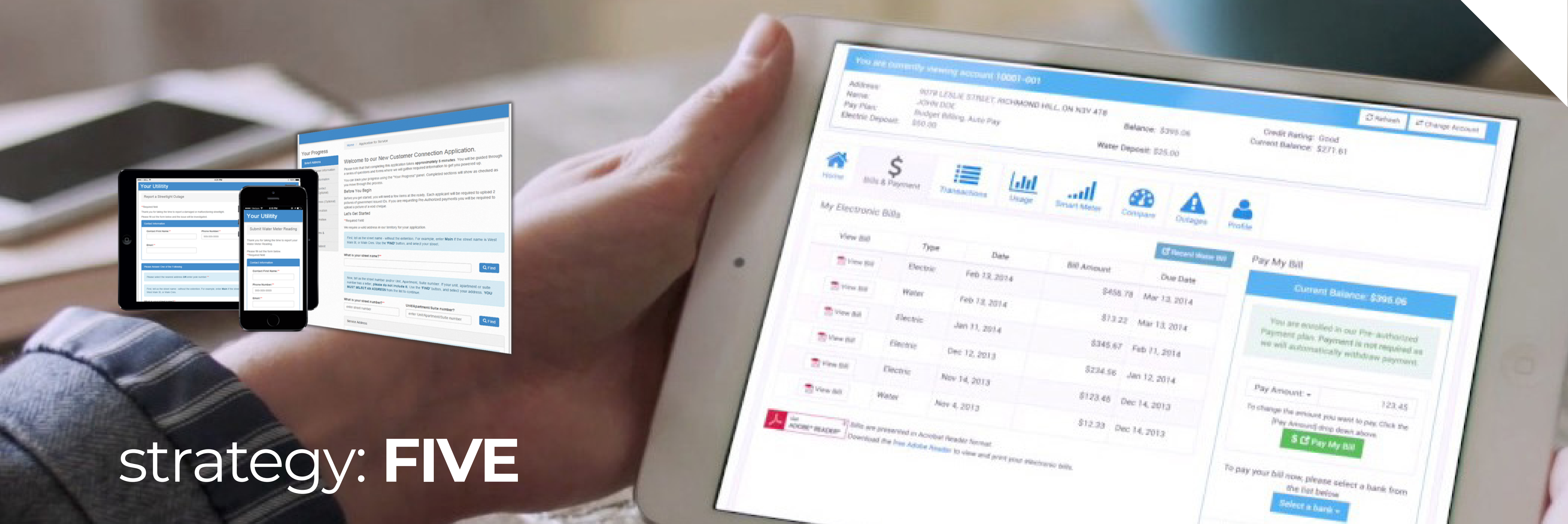
strategy: **FIVE**

Utility Portals Should be Easy to Manage, Self-Sufficient and Automated

Whatever kind of customer service solution a utility puts in place, it should solve problems and not create new ones. A web portal should be easy to implement and it should then run reliably with little to no management or involvement from IT.

Furthermore, it should have a well-designed interface that plugs into any CIS, billing, meter data management system, and outage management system so it works seamlessly and reliably with them.

A utility provider should be able to pull customer information from all of its different operating environments into a single and intuitive web portal. This should be accomplished automatically, without any ongoing special technical support.

As part of its reliability and self-sufficiency, a customer service solution should also have the option to automate common utility forms, to save time and improve customer interactions. What once might have been handled through paper forms, PDFs, spreadsheets and other inefficient manual processes can now be made available through customer browsers, tablets and smartphones.

The online forms should be easy to fill-out for the customer and should be smart forms linking the information gathered to the back-end databases of the utility.

A utility workflow solution might include online forms and wizards for New Account Initiation, Pre-Authorized Debit payments, Move-out Notifications, Streetlight Outage Reporting, Billing Issue Inquiries, Submitting Meter Notifications, and much more.

SilverBlaze's Self Service Utility Portal

If you would like to discuss improving your utilty's customer service with our self-service portal for utilities, we'd love to hear from you, either for a free demo or just a chat with one our experts.

It's one thing to research the right smart technology solution for your utility - it's another thing entirely to see it in action for yourself. When you schedule your free demo, one of our SilverBlaze software experts will provide you with a live walkthrough of our solutions.

During your demo, you'll see first hand how our self-service portal:

- Performs in a live environment.
- Can be customized to suit your needs.
- Looks on desktop and mobile devices.
- Can intuitively be managed around the needs of your utility.
- Is able to integrate seamlessly into and enhance your existing systems.
- And more!

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Contact us to learn more, or to schedule a live demo of the SilverBlaze Customer Portal.

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