



Electricity distributors in the UK are regulated by Ofgem who undertake a monthly customer research exercise to determine their comparative levels of customer service. EDF Energy were the biggest and keen to be the best in the field...game on!

In football parlance, EDF Energy owns three clubs competing in a 14-team League. After the first third of the season has been played, EDF Energy's three teams (East of England, London and South East) were in the lower sector of the table... Time for action...

Drawing analogies between the utilities sector and Britain's national sport may seem far-fetched; however if the League was judged by crowd satisfaction as opposed to goals scored, the analogy begins to make more sense.

The monthly league table for customer service performance produced by Ofgem measures just this – customer (or crowd) satisfaction. Occupation of three of

the bottom five positions in this league table spurred EDF Energy into action and a successful, long-term partnership with Blue Sky.

Scouting

EDF Energy recognised, through talking to Blue Sky, that they could do much more to improve their customer service. Historically the conversations they had with customers were purely transactional and offered no opportunity to probe for insight into what customers expected from them.

The starting point was to establish open dialogue with customers to establish exactly what they wanted and expected from EDF Energy and to tailor internal changes

to directly meet those expectations.

Blue Sky supported EDF Energy in undertaking some very deep customer research to clearly establish:

- ◆ What customers need, want and expect from EDF Energy, how they will behave and react in different situations and what types of responses they are receptive to
- ◆ What preconceptions and myths existed in the business and needed challenging/updating and what the true drivers of customer satisfaction were

Research was conducted with both domestic and business customers across all three EDF Energy distribution areas.

The Blue Sky Consulting CDPI methodology uses Blue Sky operational and consultancy expertise to interpret and translate the research findings into a clearly prioritised plan of action that, when implemented, delivers results.

The teams and their goals

With that information to hand, EDF Energy knew what they had to do. In addition to some operational changes, they now needed to take approximately 1,800 staff through a painful period of education and culture change, the like of which had not been attempted within the Network's Branch of EDF Energy before. Project Exceed was born with its goal of educating EDF Energy's customer facing employees, alter their mindsets and develop a truly customer service focussed culture that would challenge all existing myths and preconceptions.

EDF Energy staff impacted by Project Exceed work in the Contact Centres, in the Control Centre, in the Dispatch Teams and in the field – these are very different environments and traditionally customer service had been seen purely as the remit of the Contact Centres.

Whilst EDF Energy is very sensitive to ranking relative to their 'competitors', this was not a useful measure for the project as it was more dependent on changes in 'competitors' performance than that of EDF Energy. Thus, absolute quantitative performance objectives were set for 'Project Exceed'.

The primary objectives were 5% improvement for:

- ◆ 'politeness of agent'
- ◆ 'willingness of agent to help'
- ◆ 'accuracy of information provided'
- ◆ 'usefulness of information provided'

Pre-match training

Changing the culture meant making all employees more aware of what customers needed, wanted and expected from them and using this information to challenge deep-rooted myths and preconceptions. From there, the training could focus on getting each individual to understand their role and its impact on the customer experience and exactly what they could do to make a positive difference to each customer.

The training also needed to give staff the skills required to recognise and tune in to a customer's unique situation, to empathise, to provide reassurance, advice and additional help as appropriate.

Above all, it had to ensure that all customer facing staff understood the importance of their role in EDF Energy's information chain and what they could practically do to improve the overall customer experience.

To achieve this, staff needed to be put in the position where they felt for the first time what it was like to be a customer in a power outage situation and how the same situation can impact different customers in different ways. What is a minor inconvenience to one customer is a traumatic and emotional experience to another. It was about getting each individual to become emotionally engaged and thus more customer focused, not because the company wanted them to, but because they could clearly see the benefits to the customer and to themselves.

Floodlight failure...when the lights go out

Three courses were developed based on the same basic content but tailored to the specific roles of the delegate groups to ensure direct relevance and applicability. Those three courses were...

- ◆ Electric Avenue – for Contact Centre and Customer Relations staff
- ◆ The Party – for operational staff in the field
- ◆ 29 Electric Avenue – for Control, Dispatch and Scheduling staff

All three courses linked in terms of theme and style. It was important to EDF Energy that these training sessions captured the imagination of the staff and were distinctly different to anything they had done before. They needed to convey the key messages consistently, in a way that would be engaging and memorable and crucially 'real' so that the learning could be immediately applied in the workplace. The theme was based around a character called Mrs. Barrowclough and her family

– customers of EDF Energy. The courses were designed to engage delegates on an emotional level and establish an emotional connection with the Barrowclough family such that they empathised with the situation the Barrowcloughs found themselves in during a power outage.

Let's have a party

Core to the three courses was the birthday party. The delegates enter a room decorated with balloons, streamers, poppers and cards, buzzing with party music. The trainer sets the scene - Mrs. Barrowclough is celebrating her 60th birthday with a party and the session starts with an introduction to the family members through photos. As a surprise treat, the family have arranged for a link via PC to New Zealand so that Mrs. Barrowclough can see her newest grandson for the very first time. The delegates get into the spirit of the party and are warmed by the family scene and touched by the reference to the grandson. Then, the lights and power are cut and the delegates' hearts sink as the music dies along with the party. Somewhere in the darkness a candle lights and someone says dismally "happy birthday, Mrs. Barrowclough" and the candle goes out. The high emotions of the party are replaced with disappointment. The training programmes build on the emotional context created by this powerful introduction to ensure that the unique objectives are met for each audience.

Staff were put in a position where they felt for the first time what it was like to be a customer...

A game of two halves...

With the training ongoing, the rest of the season has to be played. An immediate effect was an improvement in the company's position in the industry league table.

Other highlights include a 5% improvement in speed of answering calls and service commendation letters are up 169%. The latter is quite an achievement – customers are taking the time to write letters

thanking EDF Energy after suffering an inconvenient power cut!

In all, over 1,800 staff at 60 locations have experienced this programme through 150 training sessions.

Going up!

It is difficult to describe using the written word just how big a change EDF Energy has witnessed! The socks have literally been blown off as far as EDF Energy is concerned and the partnership with Blue Sky has created a major, major mindset shift! Now EDF Energy has its sights firmly set on the Premiership in 2007, and we're right behind them!

For further information please contact:

Sarah Holmes

Marketing Campaign Manager
Blue Sky Performance Improvement
01483 739400
sarah.holmes@blue-sky.co.uk

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