



Customer Management Service Transformation at South Staffs Water



The UK water sector has a proud tradition of maintaining an exceptionally high quality of drinking water and leading the world in standards of treatment and supply. Like many water companies in the UK, South Staffordshire Water PLC (SSW) has a long heritage of industrial and engineering achievements. A private water company supplying a population of nearly 1.25 million, SSW's region covers a largely rural area of almost 1,490 square kilometres stretching from west Birmingham and around to the north; encompassing Lichfield, Tamworth and Sutton Coldfield and up towards Derbyshire.

With advances in technology and an increasing shift towards a service driven society, customer expectations have changed radically in recent decades. For water companies, the continuous supply of reliable, clean drinking water is largely taken for granted, people expect also to have comprehensive information provided to them about the services they receive. Customers want information available on demand, real-time and via a service experience which enables contact through a variety of means; online of course, but also through a contact centre which accesses all other aspects of the service provision that may impact upon the customer.

In addition to increased expectations, a hardening economic environment meant that SSW needed to make major improvements to both its cash collections performance and the customer experience it provided. A step change needed to be made in the historical approach to contact management. In order to keep SSW's service at the forefront of the industry, it chose in 1999 to outsource the customer service operation to Echo Managed Services. Subsequently the water utility regulator, Ofwat, has awarded SSW the full 5 gold stars in overall delivery of services to customers and SSW has ranked in the top three of all UK water companies for each of the past 8 years.

Scope of Service

Echo manages all methods of contact between SSW and its customer base. In addition, Echo is also responsible for the billing system, billing processes and revenue management including debt collection.

The service includes customer billing and contact handling for over 500,000 properties and deals with over 500,000 calls a year through a service centre with approximately 125 staff. The inbound, customer account communication managed by Echo includes all web, e-mail, telephone and written contacts.

Echo also conducts a broad range of processing and reconciliation activities, with approximately 3.2 million annual transactions managed through a wide choice of payment methods including: online payment; direct debit; debit card; credit card; cheque and non-cheque transfers; and, PayPoint transactions

Rachel Barber is SSW's Director of Customer Service, she describes the service Echo delivers:

"We work closely with Echo to ensure that our activities are aligned and that we have a shared view of what good customer service means for the SSW customer. Echo's service is designed to continually drive improvements in the quality of customer experience, whilst also delivering savings in the cost of service provision."

Nigel Baker, Echo's Operations Director explains how this works in practice:

"Echo's people are trained to always place the customer at the centre of the service; to hold the customer's end-to-end experience as the focus for all targets and objectives. Changing expectations will always present challenges in balancing the need to deliver cost savings with improvements in the customer experience. Our culture of continual improvement is the key to this balance. We feel strongly that the people liaising with the customers each day and directly delivering the service to them are those best placed to highlight where improvements can be made within our day-to-day activities. We strongly encourage an open culture so that our teams are putting forward improvement ideas and can then see how these have been reviewed and implemented."

Innovative Use of Technology

SSW's customer services rely on the effective use of the latest proven technology. Working with Echo and its technology partners ensures that more choice is always being offered, with better availability and, ultimately, the provision of a customer service according to individual needs. Nigel Baker explains how technology complements Echo's customer focused culture:

"Our innovative use of technology is driven by the objective of improving effectiveness and increasing efficiency – providing simple, quick and effective interactions with customers."

Working with Echo, SSW has benefited from an integrated customer care technology infrastructure, including:

- A 'single customer view' customer information system, through open architecture software
- New, upgraded call centre platform, providing improved functionality and on line call display
- Enhanced web services including customer self serve options and e-billing
- New, upgraded call centre platform, providing improved functionality and on line call display
- The latest resourcing software and voice technology to manage call traffic and maximize agent availability
- Outbound dialler technology to maximise customer contacts within collections
- Upgraded telephony, enabling call volume forecasting and improved staff rostering
- Recording of all calls to monitor effectiveness and identify improvements
- Meter readings seamlessly integrated with the CIS to ensure month by month billing accuracy

Improving Efficiency and Effectiveness

Nigel Baker explains how flexibility and a willingness to work with external bodies, has helped deliver transformation:

"We do things like maintaining active and close relationships with Local Authorities and Housing Trusts, working together on things like payment facilities and collection agreements. But also over the years we've introduced Switch and Delta and we've been proactive in the integration and promotion of Paypoint."

The fully integrated, end-to-end service delivers improvements in people, processes and technology, providing SSW with customer service and financial benefits, including:

- Over 30% reduction in the level of complaints during 2007, through process re-engineering and early query resolution
- Successful implementation of a new bill format – a change which was delivered on time, to budget and without adverse impact on service levels or customer satisfaction
- Improved bill production and fulfilment reducing delivery window by 2 days
- Extended customer communication channels including improved automated IVR services and self service card payment options
- Increased resolution rates through introduction of effective skill based routing
- Quality assurance for all procedures and processes through TickIT accreditation

Echo's partnership approach to working with SSW has consistently delivered to both regulatory and internal customer service targets. Rachel Barber believes the service has delivered real benefit:

"The service has continually improved for SSW, enhancing the customer experience and extending the contact offerings through online, voice and automated services."

The contact centre has benefited from state of the art technology, whilst Echo's dedicated teams drive a culture focused on creating a positive customer experience and exceeding customer expectations, at every point of contact