

Voice Assistant Platforms: Pursuing an Improved Utility Customer Experience





The days of utilities seeing their customers only as ratepayers are long gone. On-demand offerings in other sectors are forcing evolution in the traditional business model used by many utilities, as are competitive pressures coming from the increasing penetration of distributed energy resources (DERs), which are often provided by third parties. Delivering a best-in-class customer experience is more important than ever.

Regulated utilities still need to do a lot more to satisfy and engage their customers, according to a report from PwC, especially because customer satisfaction plays a role in determining regulatory outcomes. Furthermore, the report notes that customer satisfaction is a differentiator, which is increasingly important if a utility wades into more competitive arenas, including maintenance for major appliances and devices such as discounted smart thermostats through utility marketplaces.

The combination of more digital, proactive communications and investments that have led to shorter outage times at some utilities is paying off. J.D. Power's 2018 Utility Digital Experience [study](#) found that although many utilities are still lagging behind other industries in customer experience, those providing streamlined usage, account and payment information via their digital platforms performed better with customers.

The gateway to the smart home

Beyond more actively leveraging digital channels such as email and social media, utilities are increasingly recognizing the benefits that voice assistant platforms like the Google Assistant can deliver in improving the overall customer experience while also offering benefits to the grid.

The explosive growth of smart devices cannot be ignored; 41 percent of U.S. consumers now own a voice-activated speaker, according to RBC Capital Markets. They are at the heart of

the smart home. A Wood Mackenzie Power & Renewables [report](#) last year projected that the majority of connected devices with a digital assistant built in would be used as a smart home control platform.

More control over energy is just one aspect of the smart home, but when smart speakers and smart home devices, such as smart lights, plugs and thermostats, are paired with data from advanced metering infrastructure (AMI), the options for innovation are seemingly limitless.



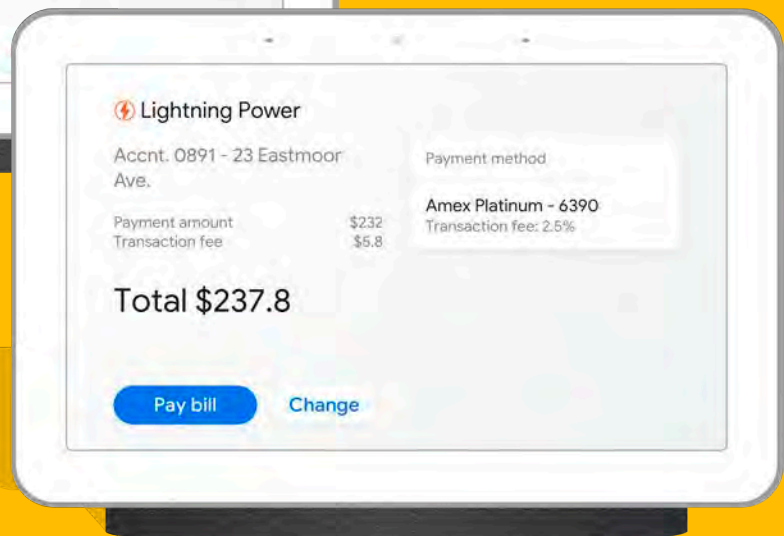
Utility program for energy providers

Recently, Google announced the release of a new developer program that helps energy companies build seamless voice-driven interactions with their customers via the Google Assistant. The platform streamlines Google Assistant integration for utilities and helps them improve the customer experience.

Actions on Google provides a set of specialized application programming interfaces (APIs) for utilities that allows them to easily integrate with the Google Assistant in order to deliver personalized bills, usage and insights to customers so they can stay on top of their energy usage with the Assistant on smart speakers, phones and Smart Displays.



Bill projection and paying bill





Among other features, once customers link their utility accounts with the Google Assistant:

- They can access bills and make payments in a more seamless manner. J.D. Power has found that customers who access their accounts and make payments online are more satisfied with their utility.
- They have more engaging customer service experiences. Utilities can tap into existing APIs, partner with third parties like Tendril and Opower, or create custom experiences on their own.
- In the future, energy providers may be able to leverage new APIs so customers can get even more insight into their energy consumption and how to reduce costs further, such as learning more about why a monthly bill was higher than usual.

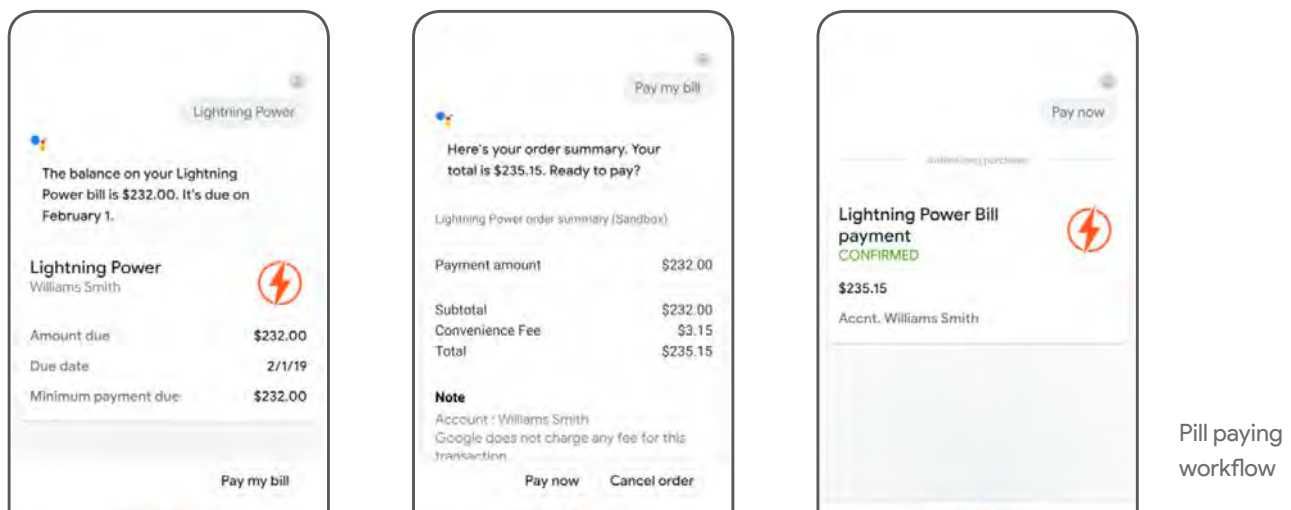
Consumers are making voice assistants part of their everyday routine, giving energy providers an opportunity to seamlessly fold energy-related insights and actions into this experience. Now Google has established an intuitive way for customers to get bill and account information from their utility via Google Assistant. Innovative utilities have internalized the importance of customer centricity, and now want to be the first to capitalize on emerging technology like voice assistants to engage, and Google Assistant is helping create the path forward.

Devren Hobbs

Director of Product, Tendril



Google and home energy management company Tendril are [working with Indiana Michigan Power \(I&M\)](#) to leverage the power of smart assistants as a means of improving the customer experience. I&M customers can already use the Assistant to get quick answers to questions about their bill amounts and tips on saving energy and money. As its applications evolve, Tendril seeks to further enrich smart assistant interactions to enable a greener future, save customers money, and deliver a superb customer experience.



Reliant, one of the leading retail energy providers in Texas, uses Google Assistant to differentiate itself in a highly competitive energy market. Customers can say “Hey Google, ask Reliant, what is my energy usage?” With the new developer program, customers can simply say, “Hey Google, what’s my bill?” and Reliant’s brand will appear as the primary Assistant-enabled energy provider available in their service territory. Reliant customers can also enjoy the ease of finding plan information, personalized usage information, and other

helpful insights that Reliant is able to bring to customers via the digital display of their choice.

Through its Opower platform, Oracle Utilities is also reimagining how utilities run behavioral demand-side management programs, expanding beyond their traditional paper reports to include digital DSM customer engagement across multiple channels. Opower is currently working with partners to deliver personalized energy insights and tips through Google Assistant for bill-pay integration.



Case Study

Xcel Energy has made improving customer experience central to its overall business strategy. As part of that effort, Xcel Energy has pinpointed the impact that sophisticated voice assistants can have in elevating the sort of experience its customers enjoy.

Last October, Xcel Energy [announced](#) a collaboration with Google to use the Google Assistant to help customers quickly access account information and receive tips about ways to improve energy efficiency.

The collaboration is providing a number of benefits to Xcel Energy. One is exposure to how productive it can be for an investor-owned utility to work with a high-tech and innovation-focused company like Google. While Actions on Google provides the integration services with direct APIs,

Xcel Energy has handled the back-office integration with its customer information systems to allow customers to securely and accurately view and pay their bills.

One of the biggest values Xcel Energy sees in the increasing use of tools like Actions on Google's utility program is that it makes it even easier for customers to interact with the utility in a modern and efficient way that reduces possible friction between the utility and customers, especially in the case of billing issues.

Our collaboration with Google is one of the new and innovative ways we are working to enhance the customer experience. Consumers want easy ways to interact with a company, and this partnership is bringing that convenience through technology they already rely on in their everyday lives.

Dave Harkness

Chief Information Officer and Senior Vice President, Xcel Energy



What the future holds

Xcel Energy is bullish about the sorts of features that can be added, particularly as it relates to helping customers manage their energy usage. In the future, customers can leverage data and information provided by Xcel Energy's advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) to receive ever-more personalized insights and offers, especially as homes add more connected devices that can help deliver energy savings.

I&M learned in its work with Tendril that using voice assistants to deliver correct and relevant information to help customers lower their bills and reduce their energy consumption is an important first step toward becoming even more of a trusted energy adviser.

When that happens, the potential is vast. It can also be a source of information about utility programs that can deliver tangible benefits in terms of achieving a customer's targeted bill savings or clean energy goals.

A combination of granular AMI data, robust analytics and artificial intelligence can answer an ever-expanding menu of questions and will only continue to expand how customers are able to interact with their utilities.

Utilities can leverage energy data to provide customers with information about their energy bill via the Google Assistant,

eliminating the need for customers to call a phone number or go to a website; voice assistants have quite literally become the voice of a trusted energy adviser.

As voice-enabled devices continue to proliferate within the smart home, our focus is on how we can enhance the value that these devices provide customers in their daily lives.

Dave Lucas

Vice President of Finance and Customer Experience, Indiana Michigan Power



Key Takeaways

Connected devices can become in-home energy advisers

The number of households that rely on voice-activated devices to provide essential information on a daily basis is rapidly increasing. This makes the devices an important new customer touchpoint for utilities – one that can drive customer satisfaction and engagement by delivering personalized and actionable information to help customers manage their energy usage and lower their bills.

Seamless integration and endless opportunity

Actions on Google provides a set of specialized APIs that allows energy providers to engage with customers on many levels. While Google continues to invest in a digital assistant that helps its users leverage voice to get things done, energy providers can focus on how best to leverage smart home technologies to offer customers a more ideal experience when it comes to making energy decisions

We are excited about the new utility program and the work we're doing to bring the value of Google Assistant to our clients. With the new integration, we can provide a simple connection between utilities and their customers, enabling these customers to easily access billing and account information, make payments, and more. This new integration also seamlessly extends the utility customer experience, bringing powerful energy insights to users' utility customers while establishing a direct digital connection between utilities and their customers.

Dan Byrnes

Senior Vice President of Product Development, Oracle Utilities

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