

# Is Web Self-Service Right for Your Utility Company?

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6 Tell-Tale Signs That Your Company –  
And Your Customers – Are Ready For Next  
Generation Web Self-Service

## **“Self-Service”**

*–adjective*

of, for, or pertaining to something designed to be used or enjoyed without the aid of an attendant.

## **“Next Generation Web Self-Service”**

*–adjective*

of, for or pertaining to technology designed to allow customers and employees to receive ANSWERS to their questions over the desktop, mobile and social web, without requiring any interaction with a representative of an enterprise.

According to Forrester Research, **72% of U.S. online consumers prefer to use a company's Website to get answers to their questions rather than contact companies via telephone or email.**

Clearly, the utilities industry is no exception to this greater consumer trend as more and more consumers choose the web (and this term now firmly includes the increasingly important mobile and social media channels) as their primary first point of contact for conducting transactions and looking for information about utilities services. Despite this fact, frustration and inefficiency abounds online, resulting in unsatisfied customers and increases in escalations to expensive contact center mainstays like phone calls and e-mails.

For many utilities companies, the "answer" to next generation customer service includes deploying the latest multi-channel self-service tools now available. Often described as answer agents, virtual assistants or "smart FAQ's", this new breed of technology, when delivered effectively – has significant impact on key business measurements such as:

- [Customer Satisfaction](#)
- [Inbound Call Volumes](#)
- [Inbound e-Mail Volumes](#)
- [Corporate Brand Identity](#)

But how do you know when you and your organization are ready for web self-service? Where do you begin, in terms of diagnosing whether or not it makes sense for you to explore a web self-service strategy for your organization?

Read on to find out..

To help you better understand whether or not your organization and customers would benefit from deploying next generation self-service, we've pulled together our knowledge of industry best practices and research conclusions from the likes of Forrester, Jupiter Research, Gartner and others, and compiled this list – **six telltale signs that your company, and your customers, are poised to benefit from next generation self-service.**

### **Telltale Sign #1:**

The primary customer service features on your website are FAQ and help pages and/or a site search tool.

For utilities companies that offer a breadth of products to consumers, traditional online answer tools like FAQ pages, HELP and SEARCH technologies are antiquated resources that no longer do a good job of giving self-service customers the information they need in the form of ANSWERS to their questions.

According to Forrester, “Help sections, frequently asked questions (FAQs), and site search often fall short of customers’ expectations.”<sup>1</sup> Conceptually, FAQ pages are a great idea and, in fact, they can be rather helpful for very small companies or organizations that sell a single or simple product line or are espousing a simple concept or value proposition. Utilities providers, however, do not fit this description. What’s more, for the utility with social media and mobile touch-points in addition to their customer-facing website, the limitations of these primitive web tools become evident quite quickly.

Take the typical FAQ page as an example, and consider this dilemma:

Even the most well-written and comprehensive FAQ sections remain difficult to navigate due to the sheer volume of information that is to be sifted through (and this assumes that you have, by some miracle selected the absolute best list of FAQ’s for the majority of your customers to begin with). Even when the available mountains of data are drastically reduced after a keyword relevancy search, still, customers are offered tens, hundreds or even thousands of results to search through.

A more streamlined FAQ section, one that has been heavily edited to reduce the volume of data, may be slightly easier to navigate; however, what is gained in navigation ease is lost in the comprehensiveness and accuracy of available answers, leaving the visitor unsatisfied despite best efforts.

Forrester points to self-service technologies as a means to provide better customer service, but explains that these technologies are not yet widely used by many of the organizations that could most benefit by their deployment.<sup>2</sup> By and large, most organizations rely on FAQ, help and site search to quarterback the web customer service effort, despite the negative impact on the customer experience.

The opportunity that modern web self-service affords is not only the ability to enhance the customer experience online, but to also enjoy a competitive advantage by doing so. In other words, utilities providers now have the opportunity to introduce this superior self-service experience earlier than many competitors.

**Telltale Sign #2:**

Higher-cost customer service channels like phone, email or chat are handling your low- complexity customer service questions.

If your organization collects metrics on types and categories of incoming service inquiries to call centre, email and chat channels, identifying the percentage of “low-complexity” calls that end up in higher-cost service channels will be easy.

Even if reliable metrics aren’t in place however, a director or manager close enough to the

operations of the call center, for example, may have a reasonably accurate idea of what this percentage might be. Talking to that person is a good first step and, if your company is like most, will likely reveal that far more low-complexity questions are sneaking in to your higher cost channels than is desirable.

If this is indeed a cause for concern, modern web self-service is an excellent candidate to resolve the problem. As illustrated in the Customer Service Complexity Continuum in Figure 1, web self-service shines in resolving low-complexity calls for service.

FIG 1: The Customer Service Complexity Continuum



Web self-service technology is most effective in handling low-complexity service requests.

**Telltale Sign #3:**

A significant number of customer service inquiries regularly originate from your website.

While looking at contact center metrics, identify what percentage of calls, for example, originate from your website. When queries that originate from your site are routinely entering your higher- cost channels, it’s a sure sign that your website is missing an opportunity to resolve basic customer service issues at the first point of contact.

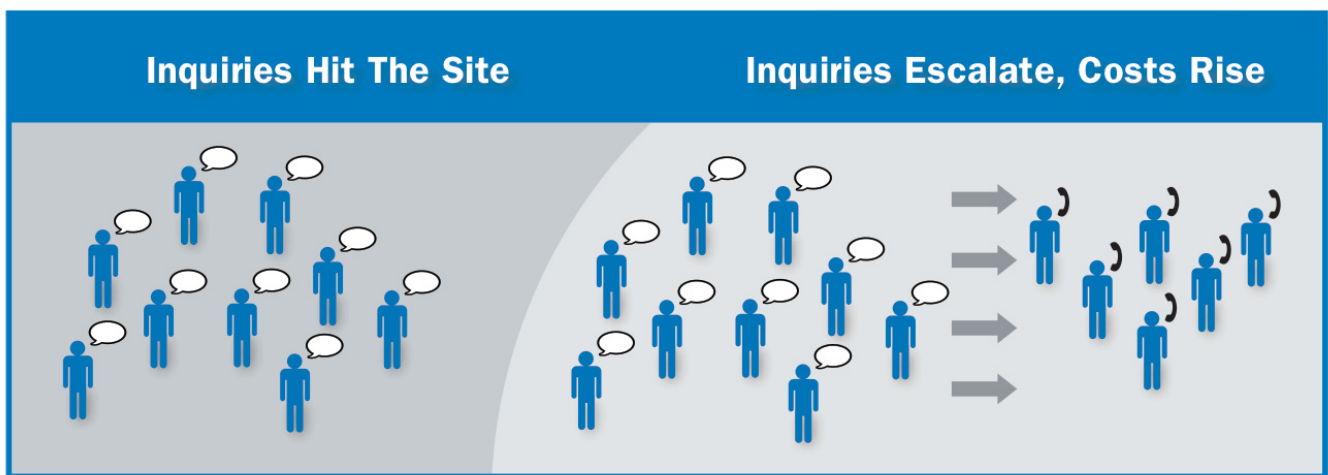
When a customer encounters a website that fails to satisfy his or her quest for answers, the impact on downstream customer service operations is costly to the bottom line.

When considering the many ways your website can contribute to corporate value, include its potential value as a filter or, in other words, its ability to reduce customer service costs.

Traditional web based customer service tools (i.e. web FAQ, help and site search) were originally deployed to answer the bulk of the “informational” questions that originate online. These common, repetitive questions can often represent between 40% and 60% of the total questions posed to customer service.

If effective, your website should provide customers with timely, accurate, easy-to-access answers and, as such, effectively pre-empt or “filter” a large percentage of those service inquiries. Instead, as the industry research and our own experience indicates, most websites and their antiquated search and FAQ tools are terribly ineffective at filtering out the lower-complexity questions and result in many of the inquiries passing right through to higher-cost channels, as this visual illustrates:

Fig 2: Website As An Ineffective Cost-Reduction “Filter”



Don’t have metrics on where calls at your call center originate? Forrester says, “You can use a benchmark of an average of 10% to 20% of your phone volume coming through your Website.”<sup>3</sup>

TABLE 1  
**Downstream Cost Impact in the Call Center Channel**

Annual Contact Center Call Volume	Percentage of Calls Originating from Web	Cost Per Call	Total Cost of Web-Originating Calls
1,000,000	15%	\$10	<b>\$1,500,000</b>

Using a conservative estimate that 15% of your phone volume is coming directly through your Website, it's easy to see how even a small percentage of calls that pass through this "filter" creates considerable costs downstream:

With only 15% of calls originating from the web, in this example the downstream cost to the customer service is \$1,500,000.

Companies that use the **IntelliResponse Answer Suite** web self-service solution have experienced call volume reductions of up to 30%, and 20- to-30 second decreases in call handling time in the contact center. Not to mention email volume reductions of up to 50%. (These efficiencies produce measurable savings and also free up customer service agents so they are more readily available to assist customers who need human assistance to resolve higher-complexity issues.)

For a more complete snapshot of the potential cost savings available through next generation web self-service, go to:  
<http://www.intelliresponse.com/ROI-Calculators/>

This tool will give you some real-world assumptive data to estimate cost savings potential by using web self-service to reduce the proportion of questions posed to higher-cost channels.



The IntelliResponse Answer Suite enhances the multi-channel service capabilities of hundreds of enterprise businesses and educational institutions, including several leading utilities companies in North America.

Its patented question and answer technology delivers "One Right Answer" to customer questions across a wide array of channels that include corporate websites, mobile devices, customer service desktops and social media platforms.

## Telltale Sign #4: Your Customer Satisfaction Scores Aren't Where They Should Be

Lower-than-acceptable customer satisfaction scores are an obvious indicator that steps should be taken to improve the customer experience. What some utilities companies miss, however, is spotting the right path to an effective solution.

Resolution begins with the understanding that one must look at the customer service landscape – as an integrated, multi-channel system – and identify ways to improve the system as a whole, from first point of contact onward.

In the example described above, where a percentage of inquiries from the website are escalating to the call center, it would be a mistake to assume that any significant ground could be gained by focusing on service level improvement practices within the call center silo exclusively.

Indeed, focusing resources for improvement in one channel may actually raise scores in that channel only, while the underlying challenges remain.

With so many utilities providers offering a sub-par experience online, this is where the majority will discover the root of their problems and, in many cases, the path to improvement. As a result, the web is the primary location where your utility should look closely at resolution possibilities and ways to streamline the accurate, rapid and easy flow of information to the customer. Three major enhancement strategies that often result in big increases in customer satisfaction include:

1. Providing consumers with advanced ways to serve themselves online, without having to interact with any member of the customer service group until the time is right.
2. Increasing the number and quality of service options offered to customers.
3. Right-channeling, where you use your variety of service options to help contain and drive interaction to most appropriate channel, while providing a clear and easy escalation path.

The above areas are co-related and, as Forrester points out, these are often areas where many online and customer experience executives are tripped up in the quest to improve customer experience and reduce costs: “Too few customer service options often challenge business professionals’ ability to successfully right-channel...”<sup>4</sup>

## Customer Satisfaction Scores Can Be Misleading

Customer satisfaction is often measured at the tail end of a phone call, with the phone rep asking if the caller's needs were met, if the information provided was satisfactory, or some variation of that question. There is an inherent flaw in this collection process, in that it isolates the question to the experience of the phone call. In other words, customers who respond saying that the call was satisfactory may have actually had an unsatisfactory experience on the website. (Perhaps they spent a long time surfing around hunting for answers and grew frustrated before giving up and phoning in.) When poor pre-call experiences are left out of the scoring, CSAT scores are overinflated and, as a result, less reliable as a true indicator of satisfaction.

### Telltale Sign #5:

Your online marketing budget continues to grow year over year – as you expand to new channels such as social media and mobile.

Most companies are facing an increase in online marketing spend year after year. Consumer preferences to explore and/or purchase utilities services online, combined with increasing effectiveness and ubiquity of web-based tools such as social media, mobile commerce, search engine optimization, affiliate marketing and email marketing will only continue to fuel this trend. In addition, customers are now more savvy than ever, happily turning toward the multi-channel, mobile and social web to interact with their financial services institution.

If your marketing efforts are driving more people to your website, Facebook fanpage, iPhone application, or Twitter feed, it stands to reason that not only should your website, but all of these channels, be equipped to offer an optimal user experience when customers arrive there. The restaurant that is not equipped to handle a large crowd due to physical space limitations, lack of properly skilled kitchen and service staff, ultimately suffers by delivering poor customer experiences. Likewise, the utilities provider that funnels more resources to drive customers to their online destinations but fail to deliver on the service experiences there run the risk of wasting their marketing spend and damaging reputation.

One of the biggest threats to an enhanced customer experience is the use of customer information tools that fail – almost universally – to meet the needs of today's multi-channel, self-service consumer.

### Telltale Sign #6:

### Customer service and the customer experience are integral to the future growth and differentiation of your organization.

For utilities companies where customer service is a true differentiator, continuous enhancement of the process is a non-debatable issue. Many of these leading companies are already examining or are close to implementing next generation web self-service technology.

However, as consumers grow more skeptical, become increasingly web savvy and are faced with an ever-increasing amount of options, offering excellent customer service online has quickly become a baseline requirement of doing business. Most companies are aware that “service” now trumps price as the number one reason why customers purchase from one company versus another. <sup>5</sup>

For many insurance organizations, the economic realities of serving millions of customers interrupts the best intentions to get everyone from the CEO to the call center agent aligned to deliver unparalleled customer service at every interaction.

But this is where web self-service enjoys somewhat ubiquitous appeal. Web self-service shines as a customer experience-enhancing technology, because it is accessible and deployable by virtually every organization, regardless of whether or not a company is perfectly aligned in principle and in process, to execute with precision on the singular mission of enhanced customer service.

Utilities companies that are committed, to any reasonable degree, to increasing their focus on customer service will like the practical accessibility of next generation web-self service technologies.

Taking time to examine the realities of your organizational environment by looking for evidence of any of the six telltale signs explained here can reveal the need for action. The advantages of responding to these signs now come in the form of downstream cost reductions in your customer service operation and enhanced customer experiences in your online channels. The latter, of course, can contribute greatly to your customer retention and loyalty efforts.

Utilities providers who act now in response to this opportunity can also only enjoy competitive advantage, differentiating themselves as one of the few providers who are meeting their customers’ desire for effective next generation customer self-service experiences on the web.



one customer. one goal. **one answer.**

**For More Information**

For more information on cost effective ways to deploy next generation web self-service at your organization, contact us at [info@intelliresponse.com](mailto:info@intelliresponse.com), visit [www.intelliresponse.com](http://www.intelliresponse.com), or visit us on Twitter, Facebook, or via our Blog.

**About IntelliResponse**

IntelliResponse enhances the multi-channel customer service capabilities of hundreds of enterprise businesses and educational institutions. The company's patented question and answer technology delivers "One Right Answer" 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across a wide array of assisted and self-service customer interaction channels that include corporate and institutional websites, mobile devices, customer service desktops, and social media platforms. With more than 200 live customer-facing implementations answering 60 million+ questions with One Right Answer, IntelliResponse is the gold standard in first line customer experience management.

Leading utilities providers across North America – including Union Gas, Enbridge, Epcor and Progress Energy trust their customer experience management needs to IntelliResponse.

<sup>1234</sup> Forrester Report *Selecting Online Customer Service Channels To Satisfy Customers And Reduce Costs*, June 25, 2010, by Diane Clarkson

<sup>5</sup> Harris Interactive, Customer experience Report, March 2006.