



51-position MAX Call-Taking Equips CenterPoint Energy

CenterPoint Energy's MAX Call-Taking system provides the features and functionality necessary to help ensure the reliability, effectiveness, and safety of CenterPoint Energy's operations.

Houston-based CenterPoint Energy recently won not just one award, but two, for leadership and innovation in the energy industry. Their subsidiary, CenterPoint Energy Houston Electric, LLC, won both the International Smart Grid Action 2016 Award of Excellence and the Global Smart Grid Federations Best Smart Grid Project for 2016.

Why would the company receive these awards, and why does it matter? It comes down to a few basic things that resonate with just about everyone: better service, reduced costs, and improved efficiency.

Kenny Mercado, senior vice president of CenterPoint Energy's Electric Operations, explained in a press release posted by PR Newswire, June 9, 2016: "Our smart grid reduced outages by more than 134 million minutes, enabled restoration of more than 1.5 million outage cases without a customer phone call, and saved tens of millions of dollars in eliminated fees for more than 2.3 million customers in Southeast Texas." The press release also stated that their smart grid saved roughly 1.4 million gallons of fuel—which is equivalent to more than 13,000 tons of CO₂ emissions.

CenterPoint Energy's recently installed MAX Call-Taking system is one of the key tools that helps support these efforts and ensure reliable service to its customers. That's because the system provides the critical connection between CenterPoint Energy's field technicians and the distribution control center through which they coordinate their work.

CenterPoint Energy

CenterPoint Energy provides electric transmission and distribution, natural gas distribution, and natural gas sales and services to more than five million customers throughout Arkansas, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Texas.

CenterPoint Energy's call-taking system is of vital importance to its operations. The system supports the company's 24/7 service to customers and enables the company to respond quickly and effectively whenever those services are threatened or interrupted.

"Our line technicians use the call-taking system to report issues and coordinate work on the electrical grid," explains CenterPoint Energy operations supervisor, John Weatherington. "For instance, a line technician who needs to perform some work on a circuit will call in to the distribution control center to have them tag the circuit so the work can be done safely." He says that a separate group of technicians also uses the call-taking system to handle residential metering issues. Their calls go to a smaller call center that is apart from the distribution control center.

Time for a new system

When CenterPoint Energy's existing call-taking system recently reached its end of life, the company initiated an effort to replace it.

They issued an RFP for a new system, specifying that it would have to be highly redundant and reliable, provide sophisticated call-handling functionality, and integrate with several of CenterPoint Energy's legacy systems.

Zetron's MAX Call-Taking was chosen for the project for its ability to thoroughly meet these requirements. It had been designed from the start with public-safety agencies in mind, so its platform was able to provide mission-critical levels of redundancy. It would also support automatic call distribution (ACD) functionality, and include auto-attendant and Automatic Number Identification (ANI) capabilities.

CenterPoint Energy submitted an order for a 51-position MAX Call-Taking solution to equip its distribution control center and residential metering communication center.

A 50-position mock-up

MAX Call-Taking was fully staged, configured, and tested at Zetron's offices in Redmond, Washington, before being shipped to the customer's location. This is a common practice for systems of this type. But there was one aspect of the installation preparations that was not so common. Zetron set up a 50-position mock-up of CenterPoint Energy's MAX Call-Taking system at Zetron's lab in Redmond. "It's almost an exact replica of their system," explains John Scott, one of the Zetron engineers who oversaw the project. "It helped us understand what was required to get a particular

result, which was important for this project because we were tailoring the system to some uses that are quite different from those a public-safety customer typically requires." (Even after the system cutover, they have continued to use this mock system to test updates before installing them on the actual system.)

Once the staging and initial testing were complete, the system was installed at CenterPoint Energy's site, where it underwent final tweaking and testing. "Then we flipped the switch and cut over in one event," says Weatherington. "It was just a matter of a few keystrokes to assign the phone number to the new system."

Features and functionality

Scott and Weatherington both say that MAX Call-Taking is delivering fully on the features and functionality for which it was originally chosen.

"It's highly redundant," says Scott. "If an interruption occurs, the system's automatic failover will kick in and keep operations running without any detectable disruption to those using or calling into the system."

The system is also providing a host of important call-handling features. "It sorts calls based on variables such as geographic region, the caller's role, and whether it's a switching or trouble call," says Scott. "This helps ensure that each call reaches its intended destination quickly."

"Call flows can also be adjusted as needed to ensure a call is answered efficiently and not left unanswered in a queue," adds Weatherington. "If one position is busy or unavailable, calls are automatically routed to the next available call taker. Also, during the day, a call taker might oversee a single service area. But at night, when activity slows down, he or she might handle all 16 of our service areas. And when we experience an extreme weather event, multiple call takers can be assigned to cover a single area that has been hard hit and is generating a high volume of calls."

MAX Call-Taking is also set up to support CenterPoint Energy's existing conference phone system. "Their system allows them to daisy-chain multiple conference phones across big conference room tables," says Scott. "We successfully integrated it into MAX Call-Taking, and it works great."

Although CenterPoint Energy's MAX Call-Taking system functions primarily behind the scenes, it clearly contributes to the effectiveness and reliability of the company's overall operations. In so doing, it plays a major role in helping CenterPoint Energy maintain its position as a leading force in the energy industry. ■



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