



## Coronavirus Communications

### *Digital Marketing Best Practices*

**Goal:** Maintain positive customer satisfaction through effective crisis communications.

**Strategy:** Consistently and clearly communicate across all digital channels to reassure customers that their utility is fully prepared to keep the power on during any crisis.

*The coronavirus outbreak has been unprecedented in every way. Stay-at-home orders have not only disrupted the economy and threatened the stability of many businesses, they have left customers wondering about the reliability of essential services like their energy supply. With an effective communications plan, energy utilities can reassure customers and build satisfaction by providing useful information that helps customers navigate these uncertain times.*

#### **Customers want to hear from you**

Customers trust their energy provider — and they are looking to you for reliable safety advice as well as program information that will help them save energy. Questline performance metrics show that these messages are resonating with customers.

- **44.4% average open rate** for coronavirus email messages
- **49% higher open rate** than Questline's benchmark rate
- **75% of customers** who opened one coronavirus-related email also opened follow-up messages

We recommend maintaining a regular cadence of **one message per week**, continuing to answer customers' questions and offer support as the crisis unfolds. Your customers want to be assured they will continue to have energy services — and it's important to reinforce this message on a regular basis.

#### **Messaging that connects**

During the early days of the outbreak, in the initial communication from utilities, the most successful messages reassured customers that their utility has a plan in place and is fully prepared to keep the power on during any crisis. We recommend that subsequent messages include:

- Outage preparation plans
- Plans to keep employees and customers safe
- Plans to work with authorities to support health providers and first responders
- Donations/support of community causes
- Scam alerts





Many utilities have decided to pause promotional emails during this time in order to not appear insensitive; however, we are seeing elevated clicks on promotional links in email newsletters. It is appropriate to **promote programs that address customers' concerns** or complement the new reality of the stay-at-home lifestyle. For example:

- The convenience of paperless billing or online account access
- Energy efficiency tips or home walkthrough/self-audits to reduce energy bills
- Level billing or other payment programs to relieve financial concerns

### **Email newsletters are delivering engagement**

In addition to outbreak-specific ancillary messages, the extremely strong performance of email newsletters shows that customers value the ongoing relationship with their utility. Compared to Questline benchmarks, email newsletter engagement (measured by click-to-open rate) is at a **four-year high**.

- **36.7% average open rate** for newsletters in March 2020
- **65% higher open rate** than the same month last year
- Customers are engaging with coronavirus content at **two times** the rate of other newsletter content

We recommend continuing your newsletter deployments on your regular schedule. It is important to replace most or all of your regular content with coronavirus-related content, to ensure the newsletter is relevant and consistent with what's on customers' minds.

### **Subject lines that stand out in inboxes**

Customers are receiving crisis communications messages from every business that has their email address. Yet, utility emails continue to stand out in their inboxes, reflecting the important relationship that customers have with their energy provider.

Based on our performance metrics, we recommend these subject line best practices to achieve strong open rates:

- Use **your energy utility's name** in the subject line
- Acknowledge that the message **includes coronavirus information**

For email newsletters, include the headline of the first article. We have seen **open rates twice as high** as usual when the subject line includes the title of a coronavirus-related article.





### Reaching the right audience

We are seeing a difference in open rates between **residential and business audiences**. Keep in mind that a subset of your customers may exist in both your residential list (with their personal email) and your business list (with their business email). In these cases, a customer might see the same email in both inboxes and disregard one.

If your email includes information specific to the business sector, we recommend differentiating the subject line. In particular, small businesses are significantly affected by this pandemic. If industry segmentation data is available, you can target your message even further. In previous studies, Questline has seen **increases in open rates by as much as 12%** with segmented audiences.

### Coronavirus content strategy

Questline has created a collection of assets to support energy utilities' content strategies during the outbreak. This content is available for download or direct publication to a utility's website, as well as to share on social media platforms.

As with the ancillary messages and newsletters, performance metrics demonstrate that customers are eager to receive this content from utilities.

- **More than 100,000 total pageviews** on coronavirus-related content
- Pageviews are not only extremely high, they continue to **generate traffic for several days** after publication

We recommend that utilities personalize this content with information or links to their programs. Our data suggest that you should promote programs regarding ways to pay energy bills from home and the best ways to stay informed with the utility's coronavirus updates. **Click-through rate on these links is 4%**.

During the first weeks of the outbreak customers were looking for basic health and safety advice and reassurances that the crisis would not affect the power supply. As the outbreak continues, and customers grapple with staying at home for an extended time, we recommend shifting your content to address **ongoing and longer-term concerns**:

- Saving energy (and money) at home
- Working from home
- Business downtime
- Bill payment/financial assistance

*Recommendations based on Questline research and performance metrics.*

*For more, see the annual [Energy Utility Benchmarks Report](#).*

