

KANSAS CITY POWER & LIGHT

KCP&L continues to bring innovative Web-based functionality to customers

Company Profile

A wholly owned subsidiary of Great Plains Energy Inc., Kansas City Power & Light Co. (KCP&L) serves more than 1 million residents in Missouri and Kansas over a 4,600- square-mile territory. The utility has 1,700 miles of transmission lines, more than 10,000 miles of overhead distribution lines and 3,400 miles of underground distribution lines. KCP&L operates six plant sites and has 4,100 MW of generation assets in operation or under construction.

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For the Web-based customer service department of Kansas City Power & Light (KCP&L), looking to enhance the utility's site for use by customers is an ongoing mission. While the four- to seven-person team spends about half of its collective time maintaining and updating current offerings, the other half is spent on developing new products and services, says Randy Vance, E-services product manager.

While KCP&L, like many other utilities, offers electronic bill presentment and payment (EBPP), budget billing and other online services, it also is responsible for progressive features such as a property management portal and an in-the-works interactive outage reporting site.

The result: many KCP&L customers are moving to the Web to conduct business. Approximately 12% of the utility's residential customers have signed up for AccountLink – KCP&L's EBPP feature – and about 6% use the feature to pay bills, says Vance.

Several options are available to AccountLink participants. For example, about 20% to 40% of participants have chosen to go paperless, explains Vance, and these customers receive a bill notification via email. However, customers are not required to stop receiving hard copies of bills.

During the enrollment process, customers can provide their email addresses to receive electronic confirmations of scheduled payments and, if needed, reminders that bills are due within five days.

Reconsidering credit card acceptance

KCP&L is again considering offering card acceptance via a third-party vendor after it discontinued that option a couple of years ago due to the cost to customers. Following KCP&L's cancellation of the payment option, Kansas regulators issued a docket related to fees associated with payment options, and a couple utilities have called for hearings, says Vance. When these hearings are completed, KCP&L plans to either begin accepting cards directly or through a third-party vendor.

Some customers use credit cards to make payments in emergency situations, Vance says. However, if it was offered at no charge, other customers may begin to pay bills with credit cards so they could take advantage of usage incentives offered by card companies such as airline miles, he explains. When offering this option again, Vance says KCP&L will allow its customers to make recurring payments with cards.

Another feature of the utility's Web site is its residential property manager portal. Through this portal, property managers can:

- view the status of KCP&L service orders for residents of their properties;
- initiate service transfers;
- view the average bill amounts of occupied properties;
- manage property accounts; and
- make online payments for common areas and vacant accounts.

Currently, one major property management company that has 6,000 units uses the portal, according to Vance. Sixteen active users from this company collectively average about 10 sessions per week, he explains.

KCP&L recently updated the portal to allow property managers to enroll for revert agreements and add or remove units and properties.

C&I customers will have option to be notified of outages

KCP&L has offered customers basic outage reporting on its Web site for several years, says Vance. Some of the Web site's most heavily visited days have been during large outage events. The utility has logged about 40 Web reports since upgrading in March 2005.

However, the utility is enhancing this feature in part by adding an interactive outage map of the utility's service territory that can show the magnitude of outages by city. Usage of reporting by customers is expected to increase following enhancements such as advanced notification features, says Vance, and when the utility experiences major outage events.

Although the map will not show individual residential outages due to security concerns, future plans may include secure access through the utility's Web site where all customers will be able to verify that an outage report is on record, and determine the cause of the outage and estimated outages restoration time. Additionally, C&I customers can log in to determine circuit level information, Vance says. These customers would also be able to receive advanced outage communications and select their choice of notification method – i.e. via pager, phone call, etc. – in the event of a planned or emergency outage situation.

KCP&L has considered adding an online forum to its Web site, which would allow customers to engage in topical discussions with not only the utility, but other customers related to issues such as energy efficiency.

Customer service questions related to the utility's Web site can be addressed via email, and KCP&L receives about 40 to 50 inbound emails on a typical day, says Vance. While questions related to the site represent about half – possibly more, according to Vance – of the utility's incoming email inquiries, customers are using this channel for general customer services issues as well such as initiating service or providing a forwarding address. One customer service representative, located in the customer care center, is responsible for handling this channel, says Vance.

Although not all Web-based processes are automated end-to-end just yet, Vance says the plan is in the works for completion in 2005.

Communication and coordination between multiple departments result in effective Web-site enhancement planning

The utility's marketing department is responsible for KCP&L's online customer services, therefore, over the past couple of years, Vance has worked with Cory Sullivan, KCP&L's customer care manager, when implementing new Web-based customer service functionality. While the marketing department is focused on the utility's presentation of information, the customer service department is responsible for keeping the interactive voice response unit (IVR) and Web site content coordinated while also planning ahead for inbound customer calls that may be related to the Web site.

"I think that partnership has been a good thing because we sort of balance each other out," Vance says. "I focus on maximizing the potential of the Web, while Cory makes sure we have consistent service across all our channels: live phone, IVR, Web, email, etc."

Also, Vance explains, the utility's marketing and customer service divisions work closely with the utility's IT department in planning and developing its Web-based customer services. KCP&L outsources little related to IT, explains Vance. As an example, the utility's mass market Web portal, AccountLink, including its EBPP system, was built internally.

When looking to implement new Web-based customer services, Vance and Sullivan brainstorm new ideas and then test out the potential services with residential customer focus groups. Although many ideas are brought to the table, not all come to fruition, says Vance. New enhancements must pass the tests of customer interest and technical feasibility.