



E Source announces top electric and gas company IVRs for 2016

Utility IVRs have improved, but there's always room for better functionality

By Kym Wootton

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Utility interactive voice response systems (IVRs) continue to offer customers an improved experience over time, allowing them to find desired features more quickly and enabling them to perform a wide range of tasks. However, there's still room for improvement when it comes to offering a seamless customer experience.

Conducted since 2004, the biennial [E Source Review of North American Electric and Gas Company IVRs](#) measures how well utility IVRs engage residential customers and assesses system improvements related to customers' needs. According to the latest study, the top three utility IVRs belong to Portland General Electric, Consumers Energy, and Pacific Power and Rocky Mountain Power.

Based on utility feedback and industry trends in user experience, this year's study of 90 utility IVRs took a different approach by breaking the user experience into three key components: navigation, functionality, and delivery. IVR features were rated based on:

- *Navigation.* How easy is the feature to find?
- *Functionality.* How easy is the feature to use?
- *Delivery.* How are the voice, tone, and pacing of the feature?

Between January and March 2016, a group of residential customers accessed and used the top 10 informational and/or transactional features that had been identified through E Source market research, input

from industry thought leaders, and E Source expertise as the features residential customers most wanted to see on their utility's IVR.

Overall, E Source found a need for improvement in all areas, with an emphasis on functionality, which had the lowest average rating across the features reviewed in the study. Customers expect the IVR to understand their selections, to require thorough but not excessive account authentication, and to provide contextually relevant navigation options.

Top-rated utilities are responding to customer needs by providing systems with touch-tone capabilities, consistent voice and pacing, clear yet descriptive menu options, and self-service features for billing and payment. "It's important to provide an intuitive, consistent, comprehensive experience to contain callers in your IVR. Our research shows that the IVR is one of the least preferred contact channels among customers, but there are opportunities to change that dynamic by providing adequate self-service options and allowing callers to easily connect to an agent," says Sarah Hutson, senior market research analyst at E Source.

Interestingly, the top-rated IVRs all provide callers with a touch-tone option. "Touch-tone IVRs have been the standard in the contact center industry for a very long time, so many customers feel comfortable interacting with them. We expect that as natural language or conversational IVR technologies continue to improve, deployments of these systems will increase and utilities will become better at optimizing these systems, leading to a better experience for customers," says Jeffrey Daigle, senior customer experience analyst at E Source.

Regional rankings are as follows:

- **Canada:** Union Gas, Hydro One, BC Hydro
- **US, Midwest:** Consumers Energy, Wisconsin Public Service, Columbia Gas of Ohio
- **US, Northeast:** Consolidated Edison Company of New York Inc., Pepco Holdings Inc. (Atlantic City Electric), NYSEG
- **US, South:** South Carolina Electric & Gas, LG&E and KU, Alabama Power
- **US, West:** Portland General Electric, Pacific Power and Rocky Mountain Power, NorthWestern Energy

Rankings per utility type:

- **Electric:** Portland General Electric, Pacific Power, Alabama Power
- **Gas:** AGL Resources (Chattanooga Gas), Columbia Gas of Ohio, Union Gas
- **Combined gas and electric:** Consumers Energy, South Carolina Electric & Gas, NorthWestern Energy

For more information about this comprehensive study, please visit www.esource.com/ivr-review.

Performance ranking of US and Canadian residential IVRs, 2016

Average usability scores across the three usability components (navigation, functionality, and delivery)

for each of the 90 companies included in this study and the percentage of features that were found on each company's IVR were combined with equal weighting to determine the overall performance index, which has a maximum possible value of 1,000. The IVRs were then ranked in descending order.

Ranking (top quartile)	Company name	Performance score	Ranking (third quartile)	Company name	Performance score
1	Portland General Electric	853	47	Georgia Power ^a	533
2	Consumers Energy	847	47	Nova Scotia Power ^a	533
3	Pacific Power and Rocky Mountain Power	840	47	Seattle City Light	533
4	NorthWestern Energy	813	50	DTE Energy ^a	513
4	South Carolina Electric & Gas	813	50	Westar Energy ^a	513
6	LG&E and KU	807	52	Hydro-Québec	507
7	Alabama Power	800	52	Laclede Gas Co. ^a	507
8	Pacific Gas and Electric Co.	773	52	MidAmerican Energy Co. ^a	507
9	APS	767	52	Tampa Electric (TECO) ^a	507
9	AGL Resources (Chattanooga Gas)	767	56	San Diego Gas & Electric ^a	493
11	Wisconsin Public Service	747	57	Southwest Gas ^a	487
12	Columbia Gas of Ohio	727	58	SaskPower ^a	460
13	Cleco Power LLC	713	59	Morristown Utility Systems	447
13	Vectren	713	59	Silicon Valley Power	447
15	Union Gas	693	61	Enbridge Gas Distribution	440
16	Consolidated Edison Company of New York Inc.	687	61	Peoples Natural Gas ^a	440
16	Hydro One ^a	687	63	PNM ^a	427
18	Ameren Illinois	673	64	Ameren Missouri ^a	420
18	Peoples Gas Light	673	64	Manitoba Hydro	420
18	We Energies	673	64	Philadelphia Gas Works ^a	420
21	ComEd	660	67	Central Maine Power	413
21	NV Energy	660	68	Idaho Power Co. ^a	400
23	BC Hydro	653			
Ranking (second quartile)	Company name	Performance score	Ranking (fourth quartile)	Company name	Performance score
24	Pepco Holdings Inc. (PEPCO)	640	69	Oklahoma Gas & Electric ^a	393
25	Dayton Power & Light	633	69	Southern California Edison ^a	393
25	Southern California Gas Co. ^a	633	71	Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) ^a	387
27	AEP Ohio	627	72	EPCOR ^a	380
28	Pepco Holdings Inc. (Atlantic City Electric)	620	72	Jersey Central Power & Light ^a	380
28	Florida Power & Light	620	72	TXU Energy ^a	380
28	NYSEG	620	75	Memphis Light Gas and Water ^a	360
28	Toronto Hydro ^a	620	76	Reliant ^a	347
32	FortisBC	607	77	Los Angeles Department of Water & Power	327
32	Xcel Energy	607	77	New Mexico Gas Co. Inc. ^a	327
34	Avista Utilities	600	79	Ambit Energy ^a	313
34	National Grid	600	79	Questar Gas ^a	313
36	Alliant Energy	593	81	KCP&L ^a	300
36	Black Hills Energy ^a	593	82	CPS Energy ^a	287
36	Oklahoma Natural Gas ^a	593	82	ENMAX	287
39	Hawaiian Electric Co. (HECO)	580	84	Duke Energy ^a	273
40	Énergie NB Power	567	84	Piedmont Natural Gas Co. Inc. ^a	273
40	Nashville Electric Service	567	86	Salt River Project ^a	260
42	Public Service Electric & Gas (New Jersey)	560	87	Entergy (Louisiana) ^a	227
43	Puget Sound Energy ^a	553	88	Duquesne Light ^a	200
44	UGI Utilities ^a	547	89	Eversource Energy ^a	180
45	Nicor Gas ^a	540	90	Dominion (Virginia Power) ^a	140
45	Northwest Natural Gas Co. ^a	540			

Notes: a. Utility did not provide account access. As part of the study methodology, the utility could not earn a rating higher than 3 of 5 for any of the three usability components if the feature was found but account verification was required to move forward in the system for that particular feature.

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E Source labels the quartile with the highest-ranking utilities "top quartile," followed in descending rank order by the second, third, and fourth quartiles. Several utilities—including Atmos Energy, Baltimore Gas & Electric, CenterPoint Energy, PECO, PPL, and Washington Gas Light Co.—were originally included in the benchmark sample but did not provide account access, without which E Source was unable to evaluate their IVRs. As such, they were not scored in the review.

About E Source

For 30 years, E Source has been providing research, consulting, and market research to more than 300 utilities and their partners. This guidance helps our customers advance their efficiency programs, enhance customer relationships, and use energy more efficiently.

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