



How design thinking can propel innovation at your utility

By Bill LeBlanc

February 20, 2019

February 20, 2019

Bill LeBlanc

How Design Thinking Can Propel Innovation at Your Utility

Innovation is difficult, even for companies like Google, Starbucks, and Amazon, which are known for being at the leading edge of technology and customer experience. Utilities can do and do innovate, but with the constant challenges of a changing marketplace and shifting customer desires, it can be easy to fall behind or lose sight of the end goal.

One of the key elements that utilities need to incorporate into their design thinking strategy is a customer-first mentality. By putting customers first as you design new products and services for them, you'll be more successful. Through the research we conducted for our [E Design 2020](#) members, we identified five design elements that will make your products and services more attractive to customers and boost program engagement and retention. We based these design elements on insights from more than 60 residential ethnographic interviews, conducted with Egg Strategy, across seven topical areas.

E Source design imperatives

Integrate these key approaches when designing residential programs, products, and experiences:

- **Engagement design.** How might we connect more deeply with customers through ongoing engagement to keep energy top of mind?
- **Choice design.** How might we empower customers with more choice and freedom by offering well-designed programs, products, and experiences?
- **Advisory design.** How might we relieve anxiety and spur action by providing friendly, nonbiased energy advice on topics that are meaningful to customers?
- **Reward design.** How might we make our customers feel valued and wanted instead of just feeling like a meter on the grid?
- **Localization design.** How might we honor customers' desire for clean, local energy solutions?

ComEd wins the 2018 E Source Innovation in Customer Culture award

As part of our effort to help utilities innovate and become more customer-centric, we launched the [E Source Innovation in Customer Design Awards](#) in 2017. In the customer culture category, the winning utility is one that's made significant improvements toward evolving its internal culture to focus on customers. At the 2018 E Source Forum, we gave this award to ComEd.

ComEd created several customer-focused initiatives that impressed us. First, the [Community of the Future](#) collaboration in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood involved ComEd working on multiple projects, including collaborating with local residents to use smart grid technologies to create a connected, green, and resilient community. ComEd is also piloting a program for customers within this community called [Save and Share](#), which includes a mobile app to help customers reduce energy use. This program incorporates two of E Source's design imperatives: reward design and engagement design.

We were also impressed with ComEd's approach to the overall solar experience. Using ethnographic research and design-thinking principals, ComEd defined a customer-focused experience and then used rapid prototyping to quickly gain customer feedback and make design improvements. The resulting solution includes:

- A solar digital toolkit that enables customers to have full transparency to make the best choices for their situation
- An online project tracker that provides seamless coordination and transparency between the customer, the solar developer, and ComEd
- An on-call Green Power Connection Team to answer escalated questions

3 ways to learn more and take action

Join our web conference [Acting on Customer Insights to Develop Innovative Solutions](#) on February 27, 2019, at 2:00 p.m. ET.

Is your utility focusing on becoming more customer-centric but lacks a specific approach to reaching that goal? Do you keep having the same conversations about quantitative datasets over and over, yet have a hard time turning those into actionable outcomes? If these situations sound familiar, then you need to join this web conference.

[Register today](#)


If you'd like to learn how to incorporate design thinking into your programs and hear from utilities that are currently pursuing a customer-focused transformation, join us for the next E Design 2020 conference [Powering What's Next for the New Energy Consumer](#) from April 16 to 18, 2019, in Boston.

[Register today](#)


We'll soon open our call for submissions for the third annual [E Source Innovation in Customer Design Awards](#), and we look forward to seeing the unique programs and projects that you're working on. If you want to be sure to get information about how to submit your work, please [email us](#).

[Contact us](#)

[About the authors](#)



BILL LEBLANC
Chief Instigation Agent
Bill previously served E Source as vice president for Marketing, vice president for Consulting, and vice president for Research. He's also president of the Boulder Energy Group. Bill has more than 20 years of experience in strategic marketing, new product development, pricing, market research, and demand-side management as well as social marketing. He focuses on helping utilities understand the intersection between the customer and the utility's products and services, and specializes in maximizing marketing effectiveness.



talk back!
Sannie Sieper is a former E Source contributor to the award-winning [E Source](#) newsletter. Sannie Sieper is a former E Source contributor to the award-winning [E Source](#) newsletter.

NOTE: To ensure our emails reach your inbox, please add esource@esourceinformation.com to your address book.

© 2019 E Source Companies LLC | 1-800-ESOURCE | [Contact Customer Service](#)