Customer Challenges Versus Utility Challenges: Shifting Our Perspectives

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Design thinking is a product development process that puts human needs at the core and increases the likelihood of developing attractive products and services that resonate with customers.

These specific insights help utilities understand the customer's perspective, giving utilities the opportunity to come up with customer-first solutions—ideally through design thinking.

Through our ethnographic market research, we spoke with hundreds of residential and small and midsize business customers about topics and sectors such as low income, EVs, K–12 education, and small healthcare providers. We recruited people who were engaged, passionate, and articulate in these areas so that they could clearly describe how they formed their behaviors and attitudes.

By framing questions from the customer's perspective (not the utility's), it forces us to be laser-focused on human needs. For example, based on conversations with low-income individuals during our research, we learned that many are uncomfortable with their meter reading. They think of their monthly expenses in tiers. Energy bills fall into the top tier, along with rent, mortgage, credit cards, transportation, and utilities. Of those expenses, energy bills cause the highest amount of stress because of their fluctuation and uncertainty. This stress level is one factor behind these customers' general mistrust of utility companies.

Utility customers' expectations are rapidly evolving, and utilities are seeing the need for customer-centricity. What better way to become more customer-centric than by having real conversations with your customers, shifting your perspectives from the utility's to the customer's and back again?

As a quick demonstration of design thinking in action, consider the question I posed above about range anxiety. Through our conversations with EV owners, we found that range anxiety fades once they buy an EV and discover that they quickly figure out their charging routines. What if, instead of constantly talking about range anxiety, we create marketing campaigns that feature real EV owners talking about their charging routines? That approach is a direct result of design thinking.

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