



# The path to an equitable future starts at E Source Forum 2023

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August 24, 2023

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We're just weeks away from [E Source Forum 2023](#), our 36th annual Forum. I like to use the weeks leading up to the Forum as a chance to reflect on:

- The current state of our industry
- What's driving utilities' efforts
- What we at E Source can do to help

Last year, we reflected on what it would take to become a [Sustainable Utility](#) and why this was a nonnegotiable aspect of our industry's operations.

This year, we've chosen to address specific aspects of the Sustainable Utility journey that we feel are the most critical topics affecting the industry. We've meticulously crafted [the Forum 2023 agenda](#) to highlight two of the biggest points of focus: affordability and equity.

Utilities have to rethink the way they support their customers. It's vital that you know your customer as authentically as possible. Many utilities are wondering how to do this, and we plan to make this topic a focal point at the 2023 Forum.

## Knowing your customers is crucial

We're taking our industry's commitment to sustainability a step further by prioritizing customer understanding. This isn't a new theme or concept in the industry, but the focus has shifted toward knowing customers at a holistic level, learning their preferences and tailoring services to meet their specific needs.

The complexity of customer needs demands a more personalized approach. Utilities can no longer adopt a one-size-fits-all strategy; they have to embrace customization and inclusivity to make sure no customer is left behind.

The past few years have really cemented the fact that every customer is unique, with different financial capabilities and diverse preferences. Understanding these differences helps you create better programs and pricing structures that resonate with customers, promoting satisfaction and loyalty. Learn more about developing an [energy equity](#) strategy to meet everyone's needs.

## **The cost of ignoring customers' needs**

Right now, our industry is in a time of reflection. Hindsight has made it obvious that during the challenges of COVID-19, we left a lot of people behind for the wrong reasons. It's wrong to assume that customers aren't willing or able to pay their bills, specifically those with lower incomes. In many cases, these customers are more than willing and would benefit from a helping hand. But if they go ignored, how can they possibly get a leg up?

Utilities must be willing to invest time, resources, and effort to gain comprehensive insights into their diverse customer base to understand how they can best help and support all customers. For example, deciding whether programs are opt-in or opt-out requires careful consideration. Opt-out programs are more generic and seemingly less expensive to implement. But they run the risk of leaving less-informed customers at a disadvantage, making these programs potentially less equitable and more expensive in the end.

If we ignore customer needs, it will come at a cost—one that's borne unequally throughout organizations. The contact center, for example, will likely bare the bulk of customer dissatisfaction, with upset customers filling the system with queries and complaints.

## **The importance of data science and market research**

So what do we, as an industry, do to avoid that cost? How do we get started on such a seemingly difficult task?

There's a lot of power and information in [data science](#) and [market research](#)—truly powerful insights that come from customers directly. There's so much we can thread together from E Source survey data and from understanding customer preferences.

One insight that has stuck with me from the E Source 2022 [Residential Products, Programs, and Services](#) survey is that once a residential customer signs up for a utility program, they're more likely to sign up for another. Understanding these behaviors unlocks potential revenue streams and enhances customer engagement.

Data science also plays a pivotal role in promoting affordability and equity. We've been collaborating with the

Edison Electric Institute, leading an initiative to use [data science to support low- and moderate-income customers](#). Identifying the barriers these customers face can help utilities develop targeted programs to make services more accessible and affordable, fostering a sense of inclusivity, while also enhancing revenue streams and regulatory returns.

The journey to knowing your customer is a challenging one, but the rewards are substantial. As utilities step into this new era of embracing the complexities and nuances of customer needs, they'll find themselves better equipped to build a brighter, more sustainable future.

## Working toward a more sustainable Forum

Sustainability can be complex, but even the subtle changes we make as individuals—as well as the collective changes that we make as organizations—make a difference. E Source is [committed to sustainability](#), and we've invested a lot of time looking for opportunities to cut back on our emissions and carbon footprint.

We recognize that one of our biggest opportunities lies within the Forum. Events naturally have a large footprint—you're bringing together hundreds (sometimes thousands) of people that you must feed, keep comfortable, and lodge. This year, we're being more thoughtful about nearly every aspect of the Forum and are moving in the right direction by being more conscious about the carbon footprint our event leaves. For example, we reconsidered our menu options with a more sustainable view on what we serve.

We'll also be using less paper through the event, decreasing the amount of handouts in sessions, using digital technologies where appropriate, and reducing the printed collateral on the exhibitor floor. We're excited to have our exhibitors and sponsors with us on the expo floor, and we wish to challenge those participating to bring less paper and go digital!

You can learn more about our sustainability changes (as well as the Sheraton's commitment to reaching net-zero greenhouse gas emissions) in our blog post [Forum 2023: What to expect from this year's event](#).