

CenterPoint Energy

Providing a consistent, positive customer experience through clear, on-target training and effective coaching.

This case study explores how CenterPoint Energy achieved significant results and success with new training and coaching strategies developed in partnership with Ulysses Learning. Since the implementation of these strategies, CenterPoint has seen significant, on-going and sustained improvement in customer experience and metrics. The success is largely attributed to the consistent support from the company's senior leadership. They fostered an environment where all employees, down to the front line, embraced the program.

The Challenge

Wanting to improve the service it provided its customers, CenterPoint Energy confronted several challenges. Not only was the utility industry going through change, CenterPoint Energy encountered the advent of new technology, such as the Smart Grid, and rising customer expectations. Plus, it faced a cultural divide with two contact centers in Texas and Minnesota, along with two outsourced, third-party call center providers.

The company knew that in order to meet its customers' expectations, it needed to provide sound coaching to reinforce key behaviors with its agents. But before that could happen, CenterPoint Energy management knew they first needed to provide clear, consistent training to all of its agents, including those in the third-party call center.

"We wanted to ensure that regardless of who our customers spoke with, they received consistently good service using a consistent process, from all our sites including our third-party partners. We want the service to be seamless to our customers," said Robert Pinkasavage, Manager, Quality Assurance.

To improve its customer service, CenterPoint launched Ulysses Learning's **ServiceMentor**® to develop consistent conversation strategies throughout its approximately 600 in-house and outsourced agents. It also implemented **CoachingMentor**® to reinforce these call strategies through clear, consistent coaching. Frontline leaders learned how to provide just-in-time feedback in a prescriptive manner to ensure the behaviors would sustain over the long-run.

"Customers should be at the center of what we do. We could have spent a lot of time figuring out best practices by ourselves. Instead, we partnered with Ulysses Learning to determine what makes a good customer experience – and trained our employees to make that happen."

-Gregory Knight, Division V.P., Customer Service

The Solution

The Ulysses team helped CenterPoint Energy develop a program for each agent to deliver clear, on-target, consistent customer service. To ensure success they worked with the entire organization, from the agents to the senior management, to build a program that included:

1. Clear communication backed by support from upper management. The team began by ensuring the program had buy-in from the top leadership, as well as a clear strategic vision.

"This program is no longer an initiative but 'business as usual', which is attributed to everyone's effort and

involvement, from the top down. Everyone is doing a great job," said Sherry Kemmetmueller, Customer Support Supervisor.

"I can't stress enough the benefit of having senior-level support. That makes it easy to drive this commitment to use the tools and the excellence all the way down to the agent level," said Pinkasavage.

2. Training. The new training process gave frontline agents and leadership teams the skill development and tools necessary to have better conversations. This included providing agents with clear strategies for taking control of the call, probing to identify the core need,

providing relevant and meaningful solutions, demonstrating control and defusing emotion. This ensured that the customer received a consistent experience, no matter which agent they spoke to or where that agent was located.

“With **ServiceMentor**, we focused specifically on *The Call Strategy*™, which gave our agents the structure they needed. This meant our customers could expect to receive the same level of service each time they called. After taking all of our agents through the training, the reaction – and outcome – has been extremely positive,” said Melinda Sutherland, Director of Customer Care.

“Our agents like the unscripted call strategy, because it’s very hard to converse naturally with a customer using a dedicated script. Now, they’re able to use their own language and organically provide empathy, mitigate customer emotions and provide solutions. They’ve been very enthusiastic about the program,” said Pinkasavage.

3. Coaching. A breakdown in coaching occurs when coaches don’t have the time or experience. Ulysses helped CenterPoint Energy develop a coaching program focused on communicating behavioral feedback efficiently and effectively. This prescriptive process provided coaches with clear direction so they will know

how to coach and drive performance change among the agents.

“We trained our coaches to use the IDEA™ model to effectively work with agents to polish their use of *The Call Strategy* and it’s been paying considerable dividends. It’s allowed us to engrain *The Call Strategy* in our customer center culture,” said Pinkasavage.

4. Sustainment. For any organization to sustain its progress, it needs an internal champion, such as master coaches. Ulysses Learning’s Master Coach Program, helped ensure CenterPoint Energy achieved significantly higher levels of knowledge transfer and skill mastery, as well as sustained the coaching practice.

“What’s key is that Ulysses Learning continues to be there for us. They make sure we have the tools to sustain our progress. They’ve taught us that you have to keep reinforcing the training and driving it home through coaching,” said Francesca York, Call Center Supervisor.

“Ulysses helped us institute the Master Coach process. After demonstrating to the coaches what calls should sound like and how to calibrate the calls, our Master Coaches are able to do this on a daily basis,” said Sutherland.

Results

After the launch of **ServiceMentor** and **CoachingMentor**, CenterPoint Energy saw a remarkable improvement in its call strategy. Now, the customer receives the same quality of service, whether the agent is in Texas, Minnesota or at an outsourced call center. Additionally, quality and customer satisfaction scores have risen.

“The QA scores are great but the real benefit is that we’re seeing happier customers. The scores on the external surveys we conduct monthly are steadily improving,” said Pinkasavage.

“I’ve seen our progression, from where we were before to where we are now, and there is such a difference. The agents have the tools to better manage a call and have more empathy with our customers. That’s why we’ve been so successful,” said York.

“What’s as important as the improvement in our voice-of-the-customer scores, is that it has given our employees a framework for call management and how to deal with customers. What I didn’t expect, when we rolled out **ServiceMentor**, is to have as many employees stop me to say how the call methodology has helped them,” said Knight.

Since 1995, Ulysses Learning has helped organizations of all sizes improve their customer service, sales and coaching performance. Using online, role playing simulations, Ulysses helps build decision making and advanced interaction skills in contact centers and at all points of customer interaction through the organization. We spent four years in research and development to create the validated content and proven methods to help companies effectively train their frontline, engage their leaders and ultimately boost their customer base.

Our simulations deal directly with the different type of emotions and challenges that customer service agents face today.