

How can energy companies rebuild trust with customers?

Trust is essential to everyone, especially people in the public eye such as politicians, those who provide services like banking or energy or who are trusted with our care like doctors, nurses or teachers. But trust was something I realised was in short supply with energy customers when I came back to the UK after a spell working abroad.

So what went wrong? Two things spring to mind; rising costs and the over-complication of the market. Somewhere along the way we became too used to talking to ourselves and politicians rather than to customers, and where we promoted choice we actually created confusion and complexity.

In my first few weeks back in the UK I spent time getting under the skin of what we do; going out with meter readers and fitters and spending time in call centres.

It was obvious the only way we could reverse this negative trend was through practical measures. It's not enough to say we would get better, we needed proof we were listening to our customers, and taking on board their comments to provide a better service.

Sometimes it's the simple things customers appreciate, like answering the phone quickly, only having UK contact centres and not using premium rate phone lines.

But we also launched a programme to "reset" our relationship with customers, using our 28,000-strong customer panel and carrying out extensive research with frontline staff and customers, to hold a mirror to our organisation and show how we could do things better.

Now we regularly invite customers – business and residential – to come and see us to tell us what they think, what we do wrong, what we do well.

Within six months we had simplified our Direct Debit process, introduced automatic refunds for customers in credit and turned 180 degrees on industry practice to focus on rewarding customers for their loyalty rather than offering significant discounts to attract new business.

We also launched our 'Best Deal for You' so customers can see if there is a better tariff available. Since then more than a million customers have switched to a better deal.

For our business customers we provided greater transparency in what makes up an energy bill. For small businesses we led the industry in ending automatic contract rollovers, we reduced the back-billing period and we remain the only supplier to have brought in a standard of conduct for all sales channels.

Doing the right things for the right reasons

Ultimately it's about providing a balance. Customers don't necessarily want to find themselves immersed in the complexities of energy policy but they do need to have faith you are doing the

right things on their behalf for the right reasons.

That is one of the reasons that I called for a full competition inquiry into the UK's energy market. I believe only this can give the industry a clean bill of health so everyone can have confidence and we can move forward from a positive footing.

I have to admit we've not always got things right. Earlier this year Ofgem found we had failed to have in place robust sales practices, and we were rightly held to account. I and my whole team at E.ON, 10,000 of us, were absolutely devastated. We'd let our customers down and we'd let ourselves down but we are determined to put it right and make sure it can't happen again.

Organisations are made up of human beings and there will be mistakes – it is how you tackle them which defines you as a person and as a company. The frustration for me in all this is that it ignores the thousands of people – in my company and, I'm sure, in others – who work hard day-in, day-out to provide a great service to customers.

You earn trust through your actions, by doing the right things for the right reasons. At the end of the day it's about fairness. If you provide simple, comparable products at fair prices, if you work in the best interests of your customers and invest in a shared future, we believe customers will accept you're entitled to earn a fair profit.

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