

# Savvy Utility Web Sites

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News **Flash**>>

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**JAPAN'S NUCLEAR POWER TURMOIL**

By Hiromi Kichuchi

In early August, the worst industrial accident in Japanese nuclear history occurred at Kansai Electric Power Co.'s Mihama plant. Five contract workers were killed and six others seriously injured. This accident, in which tons of super-heated steam spewed out from corroded piping, was attributed by government investigators to the company's lax safety management.

Japan has 52 nuclear power plants, and one-third of national electricity is generated by nuclear power.

The long-term national nuclear plan, which is renewed every five years, has been under review by the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and will be revised this year.

Nuclear power proponents around the world are closely monitoring developments in Japan to determine whether they will influence the deployment of a new generation of nuclear power plants in other countries.

**CUSTOMER SERVICE PORTALS**

More energy company executives have come to view their corporate Web sites as important elements of an increasingly interactive customer service strategy, a step up from the original notion developed a decade ago to use the Web primarily to deliver information to customers.

However, maintaining a truly successful Web site in the gas and electric industries in the near future is going to involve offering plenty of customer-focused content and convenient navigation, so that customers can perform specific tasks online such as bill paying, monitoring energy usage and even starting or stopping service. The notion is to use the Web to reduce customer service costs by migrating users away from expensive call centers to Internet transactions.

One utility that is gaining industry recognition for this online strategy is ENMAX Corp. in Calgary, Canada. The utility has maintained a Web site for several years, but until recently, it was mainly used to provide company information to stockholders, the industry and the general public. However, that changed when energy deregulation took root in Alberta, the Canadian province, in February.

**EVOLVING WITH THE MARKET**

ENMAX has developed its Web page into a customer-oriented, transactional site. In fact, more than 90 percent of it's home page is dedicated to customer content. Three classes of customers — residential, small business and commercial/industrial — can choose to sign up or renew gas or electricity services on the site. Customers can also use a pull-down menu to check account balances, submit meter readings and view or pay bills. There are also energy-saving tips offered for customers.

**EVALUATING WEB SITE SUCCESS**

- Low-key company branding
- Home page with plenty of customer content
- Task-based links that allow customers to click once or twice to achieve specific goals
- Improved self-service functions that customers need
- Online energy tips



"When we were authorized by the (provincial) government deregulation, we added online contract and renewal capabilities," said Bob Cummings, vice president of consumer marketing for ENMAX. Some of the revisions were made after ENMAX held two focus groups for customers to identify the services they wanted online. Checking energy usage and individual bills was heavily cited.

Increased functionality was added earlier this year and the navigation was refreshed twice so the site would be easier to use. Cummings says since the changes, many more customers are visiting and using the site. He estimates between 3,000 and 4,000 customer calls per month are being diverted from the call center — about 9 percent of the total — as a result of the Web site changes, which helps reduce customer service expenses. "We are very pleased so far," he said. "In our analysis of Web site usage, all of the original goals we identified have come in."

One example, he added, is that the company built its business case around attracting 200 new or renewal energy customers via the Web site; so far the number is close to 400 predominantly residential users. Cummings estimates ENMAX saves about 25 percent of the total customer acquisition cost through Web sign-ups, about \$25 to \$40 per customer.

Cummings says the Web site is being used by ENMAX "to simplify our business as much as possible." He says ENMAX has invested about \$100,000 (Canadian) in the Web site and was hoping for an investment payback within two years, a goal that should be met. He anticipates that additional back-end functionality, including a different billing platform, will be added during the next six months.

**CUSTOMER FOCUS**

Andrew Heath, director of E Source, E Business and Utility Customer Care Services for Platts Research & Consulting, singled out the ENMAX site in a recently completed survey of 169 electric and gas company Web sites. He concludes that many companies have moved from mere informational sites developed 10 years ago to serve employees, investors and the media to much more robust customer-oriented sites that now offer much more interactivity and functionality. "The successful companies are



providing online services that customers need. They are task-focused," he explains.

ENMAX fits into this category. "They have a really good site," Heath says. "It is customer-friendly and customer-focused." One of the things that makes the ENMAX site particularly effective is that customers don't have to navigate a menu hierarchy to perform useful tasks. Just a click or two on the home page positions them to check bills or sign up for electricity or gas service.

Heath classifies the ENMAX Web site as a "Customer First" site, the third phase of Web site development that initially included "Corporate" sites and "Information Overload" sites that saw business units of utility companies post reams of marginally useful information online. Looking beyond, he predicts that the next generation of utility Web sites will be patterned after those presently offered by financial services companies such as American Express. They will be designed to allow customers to easily and quickly navigate through menus to accomplish specific tasks. Such sites also will likely include unobtrusive company branding, online demonstrations and content personalized to the individual user.

However, Heath cautions that energy executives need to be realistic about what they want to accomplish with their Web sites and how they measure their return-on-investment. Utility customers tend to use all the channels available to them, so enticing them to use the Web doesn't necessarily mean they'll abandon more traditional customer service channels like call centers. "They should encourage customers to look at their sites for information and use them to stop mailing out paper bills," said Heath.

The true benefit of a successful Web site will be measured for utility executives through increased customer contact and satisfaction, he adds. "It's not so much about using the Web to generate major reductions in call center volumes," he says.

# GATHERINGS

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## FEBRUARY 2 – 3

**CleanTech Investor Summit**  
International Business Forum  
Palm Springs, CA

## FEBRUARY 25 – 28

**TechAdvantage 2005 Expo**  
NRECA  
San Diego

## MARCH 1 – 3

**POWER—GEN Renewable Energy**  
PennWell  
Las Vegas

## MARCH 6 – 9

**2005 Middle East Electricity Exhibition and Conference**  
IIR Exhibitions LTD  
Dubai, United Arab Emirates

## MARCH 8 – 10

**Global Alternative Fuels Forum & Exhibition**  
The Energy Exchange Ltd.  
Berlin

## MARCH 14 – 17

**GasTech 2005**  
GasTech  
Bilbao, Spain

## MARCH 21 – 23

**ENEX – New Energy International Fair and Congress for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficient Construction and Rehabilitation**  
Kielce, Poland

## MARCH 22 – 23

**2005 Southern Bio—Products Conference**  
Mississippi Biomass Council  
Jackson, MS

## MARCH 23 – 24

**Globalcon 2005**  
Association of Energy Engineers  
Atlantic City, NJ

## APRIL 11 – 15

**International Hydrogen + Fuel Cells Group Exhibit, Hannover Fair**  
Arno A. Evers FAIR-PR  
Hannover, Germany

## APRIL 11 – 15

**World of Coal Ash**  
Univ. of Kentucky CAER, American Coal Ash Assoc., US Dept. of Energy NETL, US Office of Surface Mining  
Lexington, KY

## APRIL 18 – 20

**IASTED International Conference on Energy and Power Systems**  
IASTED  
Krabi, Thailand

## APRIL 26 – 28

**Distribution Europe 2005**  
Synergy  
Berlin



Berlin