

Oregon City Finds Improved Customer Service



Along the eastern side of the Cascade Mountain Range in central Oregon, the city of Redmond, Ore., is home to approximately 28,000 residents.

Redmond's water utility previously relied on contracted meter readers to manually report water meter data once a month. Using this outdated monthly system, the city was obtaining inconsistent information that did not allow the utility to effectively answer customer questions.

Additionally, the expense of hiring the contracted company and dispatching a pickup truck and field service person to a site to perform a meter read was becoming a financial burden. This, combined with the cost resulting from water loss due to undetected leaks, prompted the utility to search for a more cost-effective solution that also would help serve its customers more efficiently.

In 2006, the city eliminated the contracted company and implemented Aclara's STAR Network system. With approximately 10,000 endpoints, the utility uses the system to receive accurate meter data over a secure, long-range wireless network, eliminating the need for site visits.

The STAR Network meter transmission units (MTUs) are small, permanently sealed modules that are connected to the utility's water meters. The MTUs read the meter and forward the meter data on an FCC-licensed wireless channel at customer-specified intervals. These messages are received by one of several data collector units

(DCUs) that cover the service area.

The DCUs receive, process and store meter reading information transmitted from the MTUs and forward the information to the STAR Network Control Computer (NCC) located at the utility.

The NCC collects, validates, processes and stores data transmitted by the DCUs, providing billing, customer service, operations and other departments timely access to comprehensive account information. The STAR Network system also provides a complete range of customizable management and diagnostic reports.

Better Service

The fast data turnaround helps the city of Redmond better serve its customers.

"We chose STAR for the added benefits to the customer," said Josh Wedding, automatic meter reading systems manager for the city of Redmond. "We're able to answer customer questions a lot more efficiently and effectively, as opposed to just getting one manual read a month, [and] we're able to track leaks in the system on the customer's side."

For example, if a customer calls to ask about an unusually high bill, the utility is able to tap into the database and determine if and when a leak may have occurred. Instead of obtaining data from one read per month, the utility now can examine hourly activity on a customer's account to pinpoint any abnormalities.

The ability to immediately identify and track leaks also has added benefits for the utility itself.

Redmond is able to stay in line with its water conservation management objectives and can provide accurate data during its annual state water audits. The utility also has experienced cost savings by curbing water loss through early leak detection.

Customer service is important to Wedding, especially when working with a technology provider.

"You've got somebody on every end, from technical support to product management, to a program manager that's there and actually willing to help you," Wedding said. "And if they can't help you, they'll get you to somebody that can. For me, that's huge."

In one instance, the city's cellular service was disrupted, requiring the system to go offline for more than two weeks. While the cellular provider struggled to get its circuit switches back up and running, Aclara sprang into action.

"They bumped us to the top of the line in order to resolve the issue," Wedding said. "We got some much-needed hardware to do some DCU upgrades. We actually switched from the way that we transferred data with code division multiple access over to a different method of transmitting."

The city is currently in the process of upgrading to two-way 3000-Series MTUs to take advantage of the system's time stamp data and two-way communications.

"We're really pleased with every aspect of the product, as well as the service," Wedding said. **WWD**



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