Planning for emergencies such as storms, natural disasters or any disruption is generally part of every comprehensive business plan. What can differentiate your company and brand is how to respond to your customers in any crisis.

Any emergency or power outage can result in a sudden flood of calls to your business. But how do you let customers know you are aware of the issue and are on top of the situation? How do you keep customers informed until the crisis is resolved?

While your company works to diagnose the problem and expedite the repairs to return services, managing the influx of inquiries from customers can often overwhelm utilities and other service providers. Customers want answers and grow increasingly dissatisfied when they feel they are not getting a response. For some service companies, responsiveness in a crisis may even be mandated by regulatory requirements from state public utility commissions with heavy penalties incurred for turning callers away with a busy signal.

Regardless of regulatory factors, your business must be able to effectively deal with every customer’s inquiry or request for status in a timely and accurate fashion. Not doing so can result in customer frustration and dissatisfaction with costly consequences in the form of lost revenue and customer churn.

This paper looks at a new approach to better prepare your organization for management of customer relationships during service outages. It examines the traditional approaches used to manage spikes in customer call volumes and describes the benefits of new approaches now on the market. It also takes a look at what Xcel Energy, a public utility company, learned when they redesigned their contact center infrastructure to more effectively handle their customer relationships.
Limitations of Traditional Approaches to Call Volume Fluctuations

In traditional contact center infrastructure projects, you’ve had to provision for the worst case scenario to ensure your operations can handle sudden spikes in call volumes. In some cases, you may be forced to overprovision and overpay for capacity that you only need in an emergency.

There are two fundamental approaches to maintain capacity and meet your customers’ expectations and regulatory requirements. One is to invest in the build out of your own call center infrastructure; the second is to turn to outsourced solution providers to handle calls during predefined peak call volumes.

First, building out your own contact center infrastructure so it can scale to handle customer calls in a crisis can be extremely expensive. This typically required connecting your contact center to the phone network with physical Time-division multiplexing (TDM) circuits that are sized, provisioned and purchased for your maximum call volume. In addition, interactive voice response (IVR) systems were added as part of the telephony investment. This required a considerable investment in time, money and maintenance as well as a physical connection that made it hard to quickly add coverage or capabilities to address new customer service requirements.
Second, outsourcing affords you an expandable resource to help you handle callers efficiently. However, it is an operational expense as well as a management expense. Ensuring multiple teams and systems are all working in concert to expedite service restoration, and coordinate customer service responses during a crisis can be difficult. In addition, callers shifted to an outsourcer might receive a generic status message, which while providing a response, doesn’t necessarily meet the needs of the customer. Outsourcing can also require a significant cost to maintain for “just in case” events.

Instead of architecting for the worst case scenario, there are ways to architect your contact center to meet your actual needs and maintain a cost-effective, flexible call center solution that can scale to meet peak demands.

A New Approach to Better Manage Customers During Service Outages

New approaches to contact center infrastructure design can deliver the flexibility and scale you need to effectively meet peak call volumes. These new approaches allow you to better optimize the use of your existing assets, and any outsourcer arrangements you may have, as well as quickly add new capabilities to help you respond and even proactively reach out to customers.

New advances in interactive voice response (IVR) systems and communications standards like Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) have made these new contact center approaches possible. Leading IVR platforms have evolved in the past few years to voice portals. Capabilities have changed from providing simple
touchtone and voice responses to intelligent routing and automation with multimedia inbound and outbound communications.

These voice portal platforms simplify the automation and orchestration of the entire customer experience, supporting both inbound and outbound interactions across a variety of media, including phone, video, email, and text. To provide the best customer experience, they can employ dynamic, real-time self-service treatments as well as knowledge of agent status and expected wait times.

Voice portal platforms also enable organizations to take full advantage of the latest industry standards, such as SIP. As a set of logical connections over an existing IP connection, SIP does not require fixed pre-allocated circuits, which means you are no longer tied to the costs and constraints of physical TDM circuits. In addition, you can use SIP to move the IVR and voice portal resources in front of the contact center. This enables voice self-service applications and resources to be efficiently shared across all contact center locations. Also, since the IVR or voice portal is in front of the contact center, its sizing does not affect the contact center, making the overall approach much more economical.

With this approach, contact center resources are not engaged while a voice portal or IVR handles a large number of inbound service outage requests. Callers are greeted, identified and authenticated in the IVR first and then, if the system is integrated with an outage management system, it provides callers with information about the outage and its estimated repair time.

If the caller requires live agent assistance, the IVR can query each contact center site to determine the best predicted resource availability. If the system is experiencing unusually high call volumes, based on a predefined threshold, this information can be used to dynamically change the caller experience and the options that are available to them. Depending on the caller, his or her intent, and the situation, the system may transfer the caller to the contact center, offer a callback, or provide an automated notification option so that necessary information is provided in the manner the caller wants.

Additionally, the need for cumbersome and expensive network pre-route technology can be minimized or eliminated entirely since data can be passed along with the call, without the need for a traditional parallel computer telephony infrastructure. As a result, this contact center design and approach enables you to easily expand your bandwidth (connections) and voice automation solutions on demand to give you the flexibility and scalability you need to handle an emergency.
Enabling Better Customer Response During Peak Call Volumes

New contact center approaches that use an IVR or voice portal in front to manage their customer contact can deliver better economics and experiences. It helps ensure you are able to communicate with your customers via phone, web, emails, or texts, so you don’t tie up expensive contact center resources. Via automated delivery of information, including personalized service restoration status, you can maximize your resources, while keeping customers informed.

The approach streamlines your contact center communications, cost effectively providing your callers with what they need. For example, during service outage and restoration efforts, affected customers will often make frequent follow-up inquiry calls into the contact center, especially if conditions have changed. Each of these repeat calls consumes valuable resources; to reduce or eliminate these status calls into the contact center, you can use the voice portal system to offer callers the option of receiving periodic status updates and alerts, so they don’t need to call back into the contact center. This allows you to provide customers with quick, concise information, and enables you to focus your resources on issue resolution.

Alternatively, a local service provider may offer its customers the option of a periodic automated status message after reporting an initial inbound power
outage. Every 30 minutes or so, the customer can receive an automated outbound call, SMS or email with a status message, indicating the estimated time of service restoral. As a result, through an automated service that is easy and efficient to provide, customers stay updated on status, which reassures them of their importance to you and can increase their satisfaction.

You can also use the outage management systems to declare an outage based on caller patterns, which triggers outbound alerts and notifications that can offload duplicate inbound calls into the contact center. For instance, you can proactively alert municipalities and healthcare facilities to planned outages and you may also provide information, via automated voice, email and texts at significantly less expense than if the calls had been handled by live agents.
Solution in Action: Xcel Energy

The following is an excerpt from a presentation delivered at the May 2012 International Avaya User Group (IAUG) Global Education Conference.

Xcel Energy was looking for a way to reduce the costs and complexities associated with running their call center infrastructure and improve their customer service. As a major U.S. electric and natural gas company, with annual revenues of $10.3 billion, they wanted to ensure their 3.4 million electricity customers and 1.9 million natural gas customers could always reach them for answers on their comprehensive portfolio of energy-related products and services. While their existing solution made sure all calls were answered, they wanted to do more.

Xcel Energy chose an Avaya SIP-based Contact Center solution, leveraging Avaya Aura® Session Manager, Avaya Voice Portal, Avaya Intelligent Customer Routing, Avaya Proactive Outreach Manager, Avaya Aura® Call Center Elite, and Avaya Call Management System for their new call center.

The Avaya Contact Center solution is capable of handling up to 1700 simultaneous calls with no agents logged, no calls waiting in queue, and an average handle time of 90 seconds for an outage call. If inbound calls exceed the 1700 call threshold, then calls automatically transfer to their outsourced solution provider.

Since the solution was deployed in 2011, Xcel Energy has been able to:

- **Reduce Reliance on Third Party Service Providers:** They have been able to negotiate a reduced expense from their service provider. They haven’t needed to divert any calls to their outsource vendor and the solution was able to handle their largest call volume event ever reported.

- **Improve Customer Service:** Customer satisfaction improved by providing features such as upfront outage messaging as well as call backs. During high volume periods they have been able to address the needs of their customers.

- **Use Resources More Efficiently:** The solution has helped to reduce inbound traffic and stabilize call volumes. During outages their agents receive 5% fewer calls and their contact centers have seen a 25% reduction in repeat calls due to high wait times.

The benefits have included:

- **Cost Savings:** Reduced their third party outsourcer expenditures.

- **Enhanced Customer Experience:** With their new capabilities, they have been able to quickly and effectively address customer’s questions and concerns and improve customer satisfaction during outages due to reduced wait times.

- **Investment Protection:** Xcel Energy increased the reuse of their infrastructure to maximize existing investments and established a highly adaptable foundation for future business needs.
What’s Next?

This new approach to managing service outages and unpredictable peaks in call volume enables you to improve customer service and streamline the customer experience. It brings together communications with business processes and customer data to help you maximize your contact center resources, while meeting your customers' requirements. In short, it can help you achieve:

• **Efficiencies** – allowing you to optimize your resources, providing customers with quick, concise information on outages and status and allowing your contact center staff to focus on those cases that require personal attention.

• **Regulatory compliance** – by responding to customer calls so that all calls are taken, even under the most demanding of circumstances.

• **Flexibility** – enabling you to adapt to call volume fluctuations and new business demands.

And finally, it's an extensible architecture that can be used to manage and support a variety of new and, yet to be defined, services and applications. New services like multimedia automated notifications and self-service can be leveraged not just for service outage reporting and restoration, but also billing reminders and collections. This approach creates a consistent user experience, and streamlines management and monitoring, which leads to reduced costs and complexity.