Why the creation of a better self-service customer experience will enable **Energy and Utility** organisations to thrive in a fast changing world

The world is how we shape it

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Introduction

The Energy and Utility industries are in the midst of a significant period of change brought about by increased competition, cost pressures, decarbonisation, and changing customer expectations. Helping to accelerate this change is a rise in digital innovation and technology offers which are shaping how customers are interacting with Energy and Utilities organisations. Developing this customer interaction, and creating a better self-service experience for customers, will be a key brand differentiator and enabler for the value added services which Energy and Utilities organisations would like to promote to their customers.

Customer experience and self service capabilities have evolved immensely over the past ten years. The convenience offered by the likes of Amazon with single swipe purchasing on smartphones, to the level of self service provided by the new generation of banking apps, are setting the standard for customer engagement. As the consumer becomes more accustomed to this level of digital engagement throughout their daily lives, they will rightly demand the same from their Energy and Utility providers.

Technology savvy consumers are increasingly favouring digital solutions to human interactions to satisfy their self-service needs. Energy and Utilities organisations will need to deliver a level of digital engagement providing self-service solutions which matches the level of convenience offered in other industries, such as banking, telecoms and entertainment, if they are to satisfy the changing demands of their customers.

> *At the same time, satisfying this changing customer expectation offers unique new opportunities for Energy and Utility organisations to create their own compelling self-service customer experiences, to rival those by the likes of Amazon and Uber. It is a challenge Energy and Utilities providers are embracing as the rewards are substantial.*

So where should Energy and Utility organisations focus to overcome their customer experience challenges around self-service through digital channels?

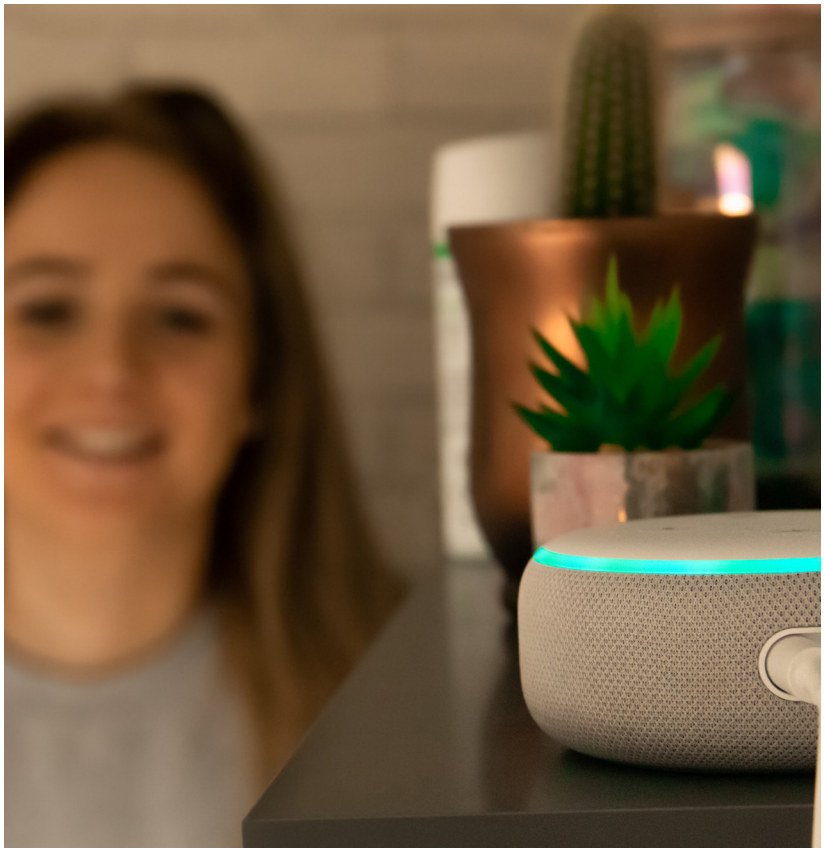
Artificial Intelligence (AI), Automation, Augmented Reality (AR), and Consumer Technology have opened up possibilities to offer powerful personalised self-serve consumer interactions. For example, today we can control our British Gas account through a smart speaker with commands such as

"Alexa, when does my British Gas tariff end."

In the future these technologies may help the consumer navigate advances in auto-switching, empower them to make usage decisions through data insights, or even use AR to diagnose simple boiler fixes.

However, to maximise the potential of these technologies, a clear holistic vision for self-service is needed which in turn forms part of the overall CX programme linked to the business strategy. It shouldn't be technology driven as this can lead to expensive gimmick concepts, which ultimately add little value and have little influence on customer loyalty.

Service industry consumers engage better with organisations who use technology to create a personalised and consistent experience across multiple channels. Therefore, developing a successful omni-channel strategy is a key facet to having a successful self-service programme.



Customers are not attracted to organisations who have limited digital engagement channels. They are attracted to organisations which are prepared to offer intuitive, convenient, and tailored self-service experiences across all channels consistently. As an energy provider you may have developed an app which not only informs customers of payment details, but also advises on ways to reduce usage and takes them on a carbon reduction journey. As a customer you may be pleased with this, however you would also want the ability to have a consistent experience when assessing your usage patterns if you were to use other channels such as a smart speaker or web.

To create these self-service experiences, it is essential to first understand each customer segment. For Energy and Utility organisations to provide a better self-service experience they need to start by understanding the different requirements of different customer groups. Then designing the appropriate experience, journeys and touchpoints for interaction with those customer groups and not the other way round. This all starts with the data held on customers, understanding how they currently interact with your organisation and then identifying where self-service channels can be improved or personalised to deliver a better overall experience for customers.

Understanding your customers and their data holds the key to success

Through developing insights from the data that Energy and Utility organisations hold on its customers, organisations can start developing a self-service strategy, underpinned by an omni channel strategy. Different customer groups will have different priorities, and different preferences for how they wish to interact with an Energy or Utility provider. They will also determine a successful interaction differently. One group may place value on speed to resolve an issue, whilst for another time taken, clarity and care will be of more importance. This will need to be recognised when designing journeys for each channel, creating the right balance of speed and personal attention.

In understanding their customers better, organisations can look at their digital behaviours and offer the right channels that align better with their interests. For example the interests and needs of student renting and using a pre-paid meter will differ entirely from a retired homeowner, the digital lifestyle of a young social media savvy professional who wants digital first, will differ from that of someone who uses digital only when they must, and understanding these different persona's will start to improve the self-service experience.

Once there is an understanding of the different customer groups and persona's, Energy and Utility organisations can start to map out self-service journeys focussing on what matters the most to the various groups.

The customer journey approach has been used successfully across different industries to improve customer experiences. A customer journey in its simplistic terms is a process a customer may go through to complete a task. A self-service customer journey therefore could be the process of receiving and understanding a bill, and querying the bill before finally paying it. This journey could take a few minutes, or weeks depending on a number of factors but the underlying journey is consistent. The journey may involve multiple touchpoints and several channels, including live intervention.

By planning around customer journeys, Energy and Utility organisations can ensure they capture the entire customer experience, and then identify the touchpoints and services which would benefit from a self-service approach whilst ensuring an overall satisfactory customer experience. This approach can identify areas in the process where there is unnecessary human contact or where a self-service element can deliver a quick win.

Another advantage to planning self-service around customer journeys is it helps to focus and prioritise organisational effort on those journeys which matter to the customer and the organisation the most. For Energy and Utilities this is usually the bill and pay journey, or the sign-up journey.

Selecting the right solution approach to match customer expectations

Once an Energy and Utility provider has understood its customers persona's and mapped out journeys identifying the self-service touchpoints which will improve the overall customer experience, they can look at how to digitally engage the consumer. As mentioned, customers are shifting towards, and more attracted to, organisations that provide digital engagement across multiple channels. This aligns with the thinking that better customer journeys are often those which are digital, so shifting focus from call centres to digital self-serve should not only bring down costs, but also improve customer satisfaction.

This next step to designing the digital self-service brings together different parts of the business and requires buy-in from the Leadership team down, with strong stakeholder management across the business to ensure programme alignment for this essential business change.

At this stage, it would be prudent to bring in experts who have the necessary skills and experience to help design your self service solutions. Often these design and architecture skills will not be present in an Energy or Utility organisation, and crucially these experts can bring learnings from other industries such as banking and telecoms.

Including your customers in the design phase is critical so feedback can be captured early to ensure the service is aligned to customer expectations. A design team that includes marketing, CX, customer service, IT operations and the customer itself can produce excellent results quickly. To keep up with the pace of change it is important to use Agile so you are able to move quickly from design to implementation and start realising quick wins and benefits early.

With the rise in self-service innovation, and technology solutions in the marketplace, the temptation to buy technology at this stage will be high, but it is important to correctly assess your needs and focus on the journeys you have identified as priority. Use a holistic architectural approach not forgetting how the new services would integrate back into your existing customer service and CRM systems.

Consumer Smart technology is growing at a rapid pace, and the Smart Home is an important self-service channel to consider. Whether your preference is 'Hey Google', or 'Hey Alexa', or both, ensure you have setup the partnerships with the brands that reflect the same values as your own. Effective brand partnerships can be very attractive to customers, providing incentives to enhance a customer's Smart Home capabilities.

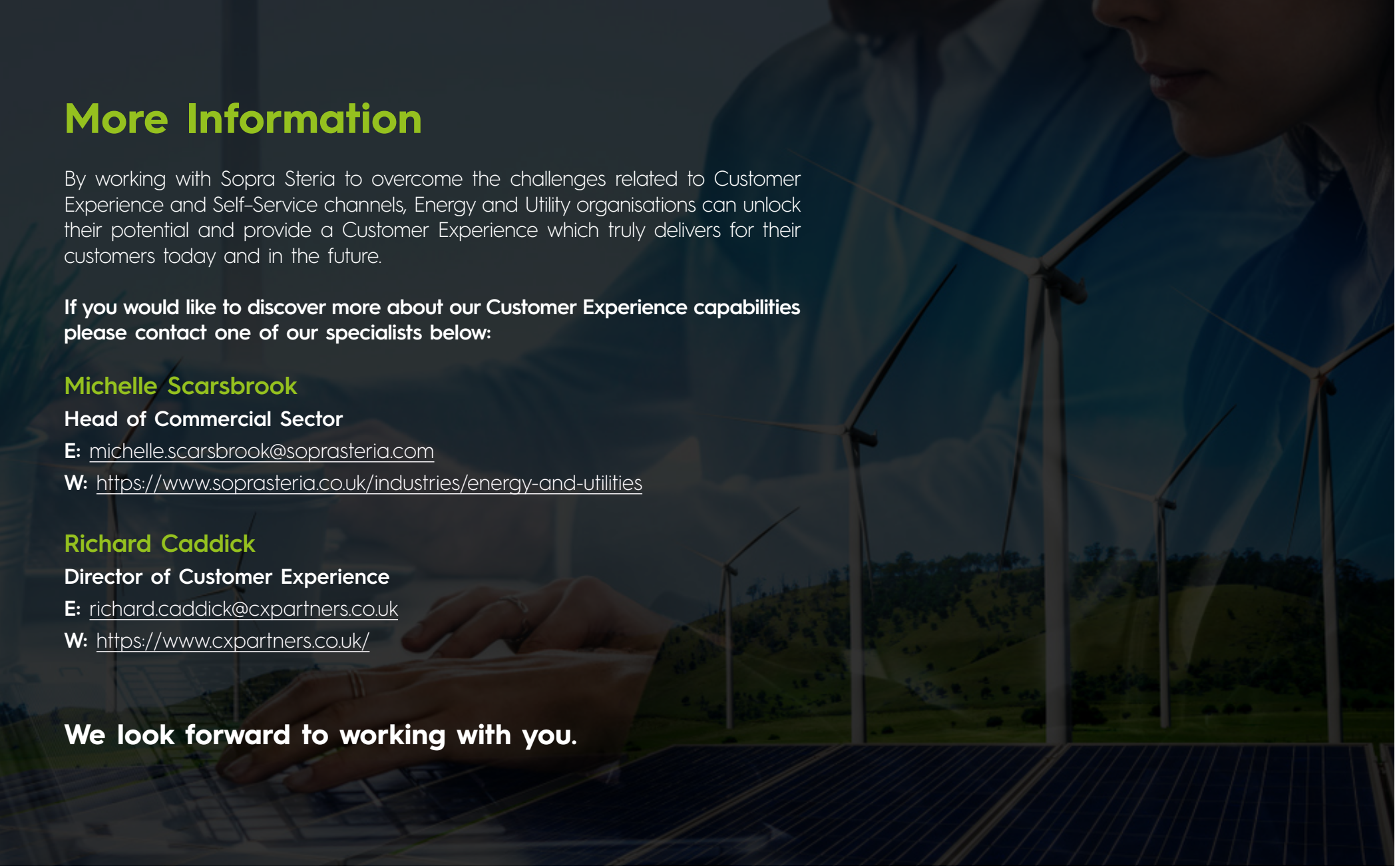
Final thoughts

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted many industries, and in this disruption the customer often seeks out guidance and information to help them make the right choices for themselves. Customers are no longer prepared to wait in line on the phone to speak to call centre agents who may or may not be able to resolve their issue. An increasing breed of 'tech savvy' customer wants to be able to use digital self-service to quickly find the information they require, when they require it.

As consumers we have become used to the convenience and quality of digital self-service offered by the likes of Apple and Amazon, and those Energy and Utilities which can match this level of digital engagement will have a substantial competitive advantage over those which struggle to do so. Not only will they be satisfying their customer's needs, they can also use this new found customer loyalty to develop programmes which use digital self-service to incentivise certain behaviours, such as netzero journeys.

The recent IPCC Climate Change report has warned of a Code Red for Humanity, unless much more is done in the fight for Climate Change. Energy and Utilities by their nature are on the front line of this fight, and therefore can use improvements in customer engagement to affect positive sustainable behaviours.

Increasingly, in a world that lives with disruption, and with the fast pace of technological advances, Energy and Utilities organisations will need to find ways to add real value to consumers lives if they are to retain their custom. Providing an excellent self-service experience is one such way.



More Information

By working with Sopra Steria to overcome the challenges related to Customer Experience and Self-Service channels, Energy and Utility organisations can unlock their potential and provide a Customer Experience which truly delivers for their customers today and in the future.

If you would like to discover more about our Customer Experience capabilities please contact one of our specialists below:

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We look forward to working with you.

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