

DeMarrais: PSE&G can't get billing right

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It's been six months since PSE&G switched over to a new computer system to replace the antiquated green-screened version it was using, and New Jersey's largest utility is still trying to get the bugs out.

One customer told me he got shut-off notices because his payments were not recorded accurately; a second said she got duplicate bills in May, June and July; a third got a three-month, \$3,000 bill because the computers mysteriously canceled previous bills.

And those are just customers who complained to me in the past week after being unable to resolve the problem with calls and visits to customer service centers.

At the launch in March, officials at the Newark-based company said that based on experiences at other utilities, they expected to have problems for at least six months. Unfortunately, they have lived up to that prediction.

For a company with 2.4 million customers, the number of complaints apparently is small on a percentage basis, but that's no consolation if you're one of those who have been forced to wait and wait on the telephone for customer service.

"It's very, very complicated when you look at all the interfaces you have to put in," said Vic Viscomi, Public Service Electric and Gas Co.'s director of billing and revenue operations.

That includes gas and electric service, including many accounts with estimated bills due to inside meters; various payment options; appliance repair services; and customers who purchase their gas or electricity from third-party suppliers, he said.

Two areas of particular concern: Errors for customers with special circumstances in billing — including those with equal payment, deferred payment or special rate plans — and long waits and lack of answers at service centers.

Evidently, the PSE&G techies have had difficulties modifying the off-the-shelf software — the basis of the billing system — to recognize special situations, such as an Englewood reader's account that is billed at rates for heavy users.

"If a customer falls into one of those three criteria, and we need to revise their bills over multiple months, they will get multiple bills," Viscomi said.

Sometimes the billing glitches can lead to threats of having service discontinued, as happened to a South Brunswick resident who has been battling the utility for three months over billing for a new hot water heater.

"I go home at night and hope I still have power," he told me.

Enhancements are expected to be in place early next year, and they should solve many of those

problems, Viscomi said.

More frustrating than the billing confusion has been the inability to get answers, customers told me.

"I have spent considerable time on the phone on two different occasions and visited their site on Hudson Street," Pat Ernest of New Milford wrote after taking a double hit. Her bills went up even though she had installed new energy-efficient windows in her home, and she was double-billed in May, June and July.

"The best they can tell me is that it was a colder than normal winter and they had a price increase," Ernest said. "I am not convinced that their 'new billing system' did not impact it somehow.

"How could I have gone from a significant credit in '08 to a significant debit in '09?"

The whole experience is "extremely frustrating," she said.

Viscomi apologizes, and promises that PSE&G is on the way to fixing the call center problems.

"The waits are not acceptable to us," he said. "We're nowhere close to where we had them before, and what our customers enjoyed before."

The biggest problem is training, he said. A good customer service rep, after a formal training period of six to eight weeks, takes 12 to 18 months to get fully up to speed.

"Our reps have to be extremely knowledgeable about all areas of the business, he said. That's why Public Service is spending \$20 million of the \$165 million for the new system on training and communications.

"It's training boot camp," he said.

The company hired about 30 new reps in July, and recently said it would be adding another 50, who will have to be trained, and is redeploying an additional 25 to 35 people from other divisions of the company.

The 100 or so newcomers will join about 300 veteran customer service reps.

Complicating matters, some of the most experienced reps are "struggling on the [new] system," more so than the newcomers, he said.

"Even though they know our process, they don't know the system that well. The newer reps know the system, but they don't know the process."

As a result, "all of our reps are taking longer," he said.

Unfortunately, while the system is being debugged and service reps are being trained, some of you are likely to continue having problems and you'll need patience, perseverance and good record-keeping until Public Service gets things right.

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