



CONVERSATIONS WITH THE CCO:

Rebuilding Customer Trust

Hosted by Curtis N. Bingham

Featuring Helen Burt

SVP & Chief Customer Officer

Pacific Gas & Electric Company

CHIEF CUSTOMER OFFICER
COUNCIL



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Hosted by Curtis N. Bingham
Founder and Executive Director
Chief Customer Officer Council
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Conversations with the CCO is a web-based, live Q&A series hosted by the Chief Customer Officer Council that features some of the most forward-thinking and successful CCOs in the world speaking candidly about best practices and challenges in driving customer centricity. To learn more and to view past Conversations, visit www.ccocouncil.org

Strengthening customer relationships is a complex mission in the best of times. But when a customer crisis strikes, this charge becomes critical to the organization's recovery, as damaged customer trust threatens to overthrow the positive connections you've built over weeks, months, and years of careful strategy and execution.

I recently spoke with one Chief Customer Officer tasked with the difficult mission of rebuilding relationships with customers devastated by terrible tragedy. On a Thursday evening in September of 2010, an underground natural gas pipeline operated by Pacific Gas and Electric Company ruptured in the middle of a residential neighborhood in the community of San Bruno, California. The ensuing explosion and fire took the lives

PORTRAIT OF A CCO

Helen Burt, Pacific Gas & Electric



Title: Chief Customer Officer & Senior VP

Appointed: 2006

Accountabilities: Line authority for 4,000 employees across marketing, product development, sales, meter-to-cash, call centers, community offices, and energy efficiency/demand response. Process authority for touch points outside of her direct organization.

Company Profile: PG&E is a 106 year old regulated California utility covering 70,000 miles of service area and 9.5 million



of eight people, wounded numerous others, and destroyed over thirty homes. From her perspective as PG&E's Senior Vice President and Chief Customer Officer, Helen Burt tells us about her strategies for repairing severely injured customer trust as PG&E sets out on the long road to recovery.

Curtis Bingham: Tell me about the day of the accident. What were the initial steps you, as CCO, took?

Helen Burt: We were immediately at work deciding what we would do, and not just externally—our employees were also horrified. So our immediate strategy was to get out into the community on a human-to-human level; giving out grocery store cards, water, etc. On Sunday afternoon many of the homeowners who were able to reoccupy their homes returned, and on my team alone we had about 350 people out doing safety checks through every house, finding and addressing issues caused by the blast. We had PG&E people everywhere around that community all weekend long helping anybody who needed anything. It gave our employee base something active to do, helping them to work through

their anguish. It also enabled us, in a genuine moment of truth, to do the human-to-human touch. I think that's imperative in a tragedy. You cannot back away; you have to be there in the community. It's a crucial moment in determining how your

HB: Well, we have to look at our operations and find opportunities for reassuring our customers that we are being proactive about safety. So for example, a process like routine gas pipeline testing. The testing process is very difficult; it involves exposing and cleaning

“In that first moment is an opportunity to be very human; I think there's permission to be very human”, says Burt

employees and customers react. In that first moment is an opportunity to be very human; and there's permission to be, both from a customer perspective and for employees.

CB: With the immediate response behind you, what strategies have you implemented to begin the process of reconnecting with customers whose trust has been so severely broken?

the pipe, sectioning it off, and running highly pressurized water through it for several hours at a time. It's a big operation that's very disruptive in a neighborhood, and we tested over a hundred and sixty miles last year through our most populated areas. When we've done testing in the past, I'm not certain we would have thought about how customers view it, but obviously following the explosion public safety is highly present in the minds of



customers throughout our service territory. So we implemented a customer outreach program in which we held neighborhood meetings with gas transmission experts in elementary schools, hotels, etc., we made automated phone calls and we sent letters. It was a massive, multi-touch

Another example is about language. In our call center, one question that's routinely asked of customers when they are moving in or out of a home is: *Are you moving appliances?* We ask because the most common gas leak is caused when a customer moves a gas appliance improperly. So in this

the customer ingrained into operational procedures.

It's a brilliant example of a CCO changing the game by simply asking: What is the impact on the customers?

CB: The Chief Customer Officer's responsibility is to ensure that in every decision somebody's asking *what is the potential impact on the customer?* If it's good, leverage it, and if it's bad, figure out how to ameliorate the impact. Your involvement in an operation like pipeline testing, where the customer had not before been a major factor, is a brilliant example of how a CCO can change the story by simply asking *what is the impact on the customers?*

outreach aimed at reassuring our customers, highlighting the positive benefits of the testing process, and we had some pretty good results: we surveyed an appropriate sample of all the customers that we touched, and 83% felt safer than they did before the outreach. So just thinking about, *how this is going to feel in a neighborhood?*—it turned routing gas pipeline testing into a safety assurance. It's a very physical process that isn't necessarily aimed at customers, where the CCO's obligation is to inject the voice and the sensibility of the customer.

case, something as simple as adding a few words to the call center script that explains: *Mr. Bingham, I'm concerned for your safety, and one of the most common issues occurs when a customer moves a gas appliance. Will you be doing that? Because I want to send one of our gas service reps out, just to ensure your safety,* is another example of repackaging a routine operation in a way that reassures the customer that we place a high priority on customer safety. And it's important to seize these opportunities of getting

HB: Exactly. And there are multiple benefits: yes, we reassured a lot of already anxious customers who would have been even more concerned if they hadn't known what we were doing or why. As we enter our neighborhoods we want our customer to know this is a positive thing, and they should feel safe. Secondly, there were pipeline sections where we did find small leaks, and there was news coverage of leaking pipelines that brings



San Bruno back to mind, but through our outreach we're continuing the drumbeat: *This is what we hoped to find, we found it, and we're taking care of it*, so it helps to keep us in front of any potential negativity. And thirdly, by ingraining the customer in routine operations you are internally reinforcing the power of the customer and the way in which happy customers make our work easier. In this case, one of the leaders on pipeline testing was an officer with a strong engineering background

regular contact, is such an eye opener.

HB: Yes, exactly. One thing that we're trying to drive is an understanding that the more customers feel like we're doing the right thing, the easier our job is. I'm also using ongoing, in-person, customer focus groups that my group is coordinating but which I have other executives chair, and that's been great for continuing to forge that awareness of the intrinsic value of customer satisfaction.

proactive about public safety, and continue demonstrating the priority we're placing on safety. Second, the biggest factor driving customer satisfaction at PG&E right now is the emotional connection they have with our company. How much do they trust us, and how trustworthy are we? So we have initiatives around striving to be very straightforward—"say what we do, do what we say." And third, when you have a defining moment like this you want to quickly get to the feeling of *that's what we used to be*, and move the focus to how you do business going forward, so we're trying to pivot in that direction.

Regular contact with customers opens employees' eyes, driving home the message: Happy customers make our work easier.

whose primary job, when he's not pitching in to help on the testing, is to run our hydro plants. He doesn't have much customer contact, but through participating in the outreach program, the customer sensibility really sunk in for him.

CB: It's a very simple thing, and because of that it gets lost: Contact with the customers,

CB: And now, a year and a half later, what initiatives are you focusing on in continuing to mend and strengthen those relationships?

HB: My top initiatives are all based in our customer research, which is pretty extensive. First is increasing customer confidence in public safety. We want to continue being very

CB: The CCO has to know the customer, and it's an important point you make, that effective initiatives must be based in customer research.

HB: It's so important, not just to inform your actions but also to know when not to act. We already understood from customer research that we were viewed as a company that



talks a good talk but doesn't deliver well, even before San Bruno. So by the middle of 2011, customer perception was probably at its all-time low. For my colleague who has public relations to go out and deliver a campaign aimed at driving our numbers up? We just didn't have permission to do that. In

fact, the research proved that were we to attempt it, we would just take our numbers lower. That kind of campaign would have rung incredibly hollow.

CB: It's been an amazing conversation. There's so much

to learn from your experience; thank you for sharing it.

HB: We've had a long journey. We certainly aren't back yet, but we're continuing to work to earn public trust as a company committed to our customers and their safety.



About CURTIS N. BINGHAM

As Executive Director of the Chief Customer Officer Council™, Curtis Bingham is the recognized authority on chief customer officers and the first to promote this role as a catalyst for competitive advantage. He is the creator of the CCO Roadmap, a groundbreaking work containing 100+ critical strategies essential for customer centricity. As an international speaker, author, and consultant, Curtis is passionate about creating customer strategy to sustainably grow revenue, profit, and loyalty.



About HELEN BURT

Helen Burt is Senior Vice President and Chief Customer Officer for Pacific Gas and Electric Company. An acknowledged expert in the utility industry, Helen is responsible for leading marketing, product development, sales and services, as well as all meter-to-cash operations, call centers, and field gas and electric service. She also leads a \$2.0 billion SmartMeter™ deployment and an extensive portfolio of energy efficiency, solar, and demand response activities. She is an internationally sought after speaker on the topics of customer service, marketing and quality assurance.

About THE CHIEF CUSTOMER OFFICER COUNCIL

The Chief Customer Officer Council is the first of its kind; a member-led peer-advisory network offering unparalleled insight into the critical issues facing CCOs. It was created to provide a safe environment where CCOs can share ideas, concerns, and build best practices that will help them, their companies, and especially their customers succeed. The Council includes CCOs from diverse industries, purposefully cross-pollinated with the most forward-thinking companies, large and small. For more information, visit www.ccocouncil.org, email info@ccocouncil.org or call 978-226-8675.



Conversations with the CCO: Helen Burt Shares Customer Engagement Strategies – In this Q&A from an online interview by Curtis N. Bingham, Helen Burt, Chief Customer Officer of PG&E, discusses initiatives and lessons learned in driving customer centricity and engagement at one of the nation's largest utilities.

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