



Hartlepool Water Case Study

Hartlepool Water keeps good customer service flowing with IVR from Encoded

Hartlepool Water was established in 1846 as the Hartlepool Gas and Water Company to supply its first customers with water from a source situated directly behind the company's existing offices which could provide up to 40,000 litres an hour. Today, Hartlepool Water supplies 35 times that volume of drinking water to a population of approximately 90,000 living in the North East of England. The water originates from a number of underground sources and is distributed via an infrastructure that includes treatment works, 6 storage reservoirs and approximately 700km of mains pipe.



In addition, Hartlepool Water operates three high specification treatment plants to create industrial grade water for several large and prominent industrial customers in the region. Hartlepool Water is now a part of Anglian Water.





The challenges of operating in a highly regulated industry

Hartlepool Water, as part of Anglian Water, is one of 33 providers of water and sewerage services in England and Wales that are regulated by Ofwat, the Water Services Regulation Authority which monitors the quality of customer service and the prices charged to consumers. Hartlepool Water is proud of its record as one of the top water companies in the UK and constantly reviews how it is progressing against the measures and goals set out by Ofwat and other key stakeholders.

Hartlepool Water works to develop more sustainable ways of delivering services, a core component of its 'Love Every Drop' campaign, the organisation's long-term strategy designed to help people understand the realities of water use and climate change and the importance of acting today while thinking 25 years ahead.

Delivering excellent customer service during rainy days and drought

The combination of today's population boom and more frequent periods of drought could make filling the kettle and doing the washing a challenge for everyone in the future. In just the same way that Hartlepool Water is constantly finding new solutions to keep the taps running, it is equally focused on finding the right technology to deliver continuous levels of excellent customer service. According to Julie Hall, Billing and Income Manager at Hartlepool Water, "This approach to customer service is particularly evident in our small but efficient customer service bureau that typically handles around 35,000 - 40,000 calls every year. Some time ago we invested in interactive voice response (IVR) technology from Encoded to automate a variety of processes and maximise our resources. The automated payment system has produced significant time savings enabling staff to deal with other customer enquiries in a more personal way and allowing improved service all round."



Hartlepool Water's 10-strong customer service operation includes dedicated customer service agents, debt recovery specialists, a cashier and others. However, all team members are highly adaptable and trained to respond to a variety of customer queries ranging from changes of address to questions about payment plans and debt recovery notices.



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Julie Hall
Billing and Income Manager
Hartlepool Water

IVR keeps payments flowing

Growing demand by consumers to pay their bills, and for other services, by credit or debit card prompted Hartlepool Water to re-evaluate its processes and technology.

Julie Hall continued, “Before Encoded, our team spent the majority of its time taking card details and then processing them manually, a time-consuming process that would ultimately have forced us to increase our headcount significantly. It made perfect business sense to drive efficiencies by automating our payment processes. We took the decision to work with a trusted technology partner like Encoded which had an excellent track record in the industry and could share its knowledge and expertise to create a highly robust, scalable framework that would serve us well into the future.”

The customer service office is open from 8.30am until 5pm with the cash office taking payments from 9am until 4pm from visitors to the building, and Hartlepool Water is proud to offer this personalised, local service where customers can drop in; so rare in today’s utility world. Outside these hours, customers are able to make card payments using Encoded’s IVR and automated payments solution 24 hours-a-day, seven days-a-week. Accepting credit and debit cards via Encoded IVR is a cost effective and secure way of taking card payments. It allows customers to pay quickly and accurately while reducing agent transaction time and improving security for customers at the time they want.

Julie Hall added, “Using Encoded’s innovative technology means we are now open 24 hours a day, giving consumers the round-the-clock service they need to fit in with their busy lifestyles. They can make payments anytime, from anywhere quickly and securely. Last year, over 12,000 IVR payment calls were handled successfully, proof that the service is gaining rapid popularity with our customers.”

Prior to implementing the Encoded solution, Julie’s team relied on an onscreen system to take card payments over the telephone. Now the majority of customers choose to go through the Encoded IVR solution that offers a simple, two-option menu or are transferred by an agent to the payment system following an initial conversation.

“However,” Julie Hall insists, “if a customer is elderly or is having problem making a payment electronically, we haven’t lost the personal touch and are more than happy to take card details over the phone. That’s still a very important part of delivering excellent customer service.”





Automation ushers in a stream of management benefits

The deployment of Encoded has realised a series of benefits to agents, customers and Hartlepool Water's management team. With noticeably fewer calls coming into the customer service office, staff are less pressured and faster response times mean customers are happier because they spend less time waiting in a queue.

In particular, senior managers praise the intelligence of the Encoded system and its ability to support their adherence to the stringent requirements of industry regulators like Ofwat. This helps them avoid the penalties that can be imposed on water service providers who receive written complaints or fail to meet their Service Incentive Mechanism (SIM) score when they repeatedly report abandoned or unanswered calls.

Julie Hall concluded, "Without a shadow of doubt, Encoded has enabled us to create a highly efficient environment that boosts employee morale and increases customer confidence. It has contributed to our regulatory compliance programme and positively impacted our overall performance. In short, the professionalism and support we receive from the Encoded team helps us maintain our prominent position in the marketplace and reputation for excellent customer service."

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About Encoded

Encoded is a leading provider of interactive voice response solutions and automated payment solutions. All the company's services are designed to fulfil three key objectives:

- Reduce costs by automating business processes**
- Increase sales by offering new fulfilment channels**
- Improve customer service by maximising resource efficiency**

Encoded was established in 2001 to offer affordable, pay-as-you-go solutions to the growing telecommunications requirements of small and large businesses. Today, the company's software regularly supports 30 million customers and 10 million calls globally and automates £60 million of secure payments without operator intervention.

For more information please visit
www.encoded.co.uk

