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CPS FIRST IN CITY TO OFFER VIRTUAL QUEUING TECHNOLOGY

This summer when call wait times at City Public Service (CPS) exceed two minutes, utility customers won't have to be glued to the telephone, thanks to Virtual Hold, virtual queuing software that lets customers go about their business without losing their place in line. This technology is the first of its kind in San Antonio.

During a high- call-volume day, rather than waiting on the phone to speak to a representative at the utility's call center, CPS customers can wait in a virtual line.

"Although call wait times at CPS are averaging only 30 seconds, we are preparing for the busy summer season when wait times can exceed two minutes," said Sylvia Arnold, CPS customer services director. "Given our busy customers and the complexities of life, we wanted to save customers time and offer them options while conducting business with CPS."

When calling CPS, customers will still hear the same menu of options, according to Arnold. However, if the customer chooses to speak to a CPS representative and the wait time is two minutes or greater, the call is routed to the Virtual Hold system. The system informs the caller of the estimated wait time

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and allows the person to be called back in the same amount of time as if waiting on hold.

Once the caller enters a phone number and speaks his or her name, Virtual Hold allows the person to hang up the phone while the system holds the individual's place in line. What's more, the customer has the option of scheduling a return call at a time – between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday – and location that is most convenient for him or her.

“Customers are still waiting in line temporarily, but it's a virtual line so they can go about their business – taking care of children, buying groceries or doing whatever else they want,” Arnold said.

When it's the customer's turn to speak with a representative, the system calls the person back, verifies that the correct person is on the line and then connects the customer with an available representative.

“CPS was looking for a solution to improve customer service, and Virtual Hold was the logical fit,” said Mark Williams, president and founder of Virtual Hold Technology (VHT) of Akron, Ohio. “Utility companies have especially challenging environments for matching staff to call demand, since calls are driven by billing cycles, heating and cooling processes, and weather-related emergencies.”

In May 2004, 82 percent of the 119,360 customer calls CPS received were answered in less than 30 seconds, and only 4 percent of the customers hung up before receiving assistance, Arnold said.

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“Process improvement and training have helped reduce wait times significantly over last year,” Arnold added.

During May 2003, the typical CPS customer waited almost six minutes before speaking to a representative, and nearly 20 percent of the callers hung up before being assisted.

“Customers have repeatedly told us they want choices, and they don’t want to be on hold more than two or three minutes,” said Arnold. “Virtual Hold gives them both. Plus, it’s cost effective, especially during peak times because we can help more customers faster.”

Arnold noted that CPS has made, and continues to make, changes to be more customer friendly. “Our focus is to make it easier for our customers to do business with us and to respect them and their time,” she said.

VHT, which holds the patent for the Virtual Queuing technology, is a software development company that seeks to provide callback solutions for financial services, telecommunications and cable as well as wireless and retail corporations such as Wells Fargo, Cox Communications, Bell Mobility, Ticketmaster and Avon.

CPS is the nation’s largest municipally owned energy company providing both natural gas and electric service. Acquired by the City of San Antonio in 1942, CPS serves more than 600,000 electric customers and more than 300,000 natural gas customers in and around the ninth largest city in the United States.

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Proceeds from CPS remain in San Antonio and account for more than one-fourth of the City's annual operating budget for police and fire protection, street improvements, parks and other services. CPS has earned the highest financial rating of any electric system in the nation. More information about CPS can be found on the Web at www.citypublicservice.com. CPS is a registered trademark of City Public Service.

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