

Case study: National Grid

*Developing a strategy for
communicating with field workers*



Background and challenge

National Grid's UK Gas Distribution business is responsible for ensuring that gas reaches each household safely. Although National Grid does not enjoy a commercial relationship with domestic users, its 3,000 strong field force is highly visible, coming into daily contact with consumers as they respond to leaks and renew infrastructure.

The impact of technology and a continual drive for efficiency mean that engineers now operate principally from their vehicles, supported by mobile devices and roving supervisors. This presents a communication challenge and National Grid approached Ibis Communication to help resolve it.

Approach

We Initially, we worked to obtain the view of field force communication from within the business. Engaging representative managers at all levels using face-to-face and telephone interviews, we quickly built up a picture of how communication functioned (or didn't) for these leaders: their priorities, expectations and experiences, and understanding of their own roles in the process.

In parallel, we worked closely with communicators and technologists to understand the current and likely evolution of the channels mix, again using interviews, metrics and document reviews to gain a practical understanding of the landscape.

Finally, we went into the field to obtain the view of communication from the audience. Mindful that the business already had good (though broad) quantitative data, we used focus groups to gain a deeper understanding of how engineers viewed communication. This phase was also an opportunity to elicit feedback on ideas for change or innovation, although we were also careful to exercise sensitivity, recognising that expectation management is critical within a unionised environment.

Results

Our research showed that the critical success factors extended far beyond the official communication function, and required a co-ordinated response from stakeholders throughout the business. National Grid has since used our findings and recommendations as the basis for several new initiatives aimed at improving the quality of communication within the field force, with early metrics suggesting a positive reception from the engineers.

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