



What will it take to become a Sustainable Utility?

Reflections on the 2022 Forum

By Ted Schultz

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If you can believe it, 2022 is coming to a close and what a year it was!

As I reflect on the year, I'm brought back to what a resounding success [E Source Forum 2022](#) was. For the Forum, we returned in person in September and the experience left us feeling inspired and ready for the coming year. It was a fantastic feeling to have everyone in the same room again and provide a venue for utility peers to network and brainstorm together.

One thing I found extremely moving was witnessing colleagues from the same utility meeting each other at the Forum for the first time. I love that E Source can provide a space to bring colleagues and peers together who are spread across multiple functions at utilities.

I heard from so many utilities at the Forum about what's top of mind for them and what challenges they're preparing to tackle in 2023. And our E Source team looks forward to helping our utility clients meet these challenges and achieve their 2023 goals.

Empowering the Sustainable Utility

The theme of this year's Forum was Empowering the [Sustainable Utility](#). Our content and conversations focused on how utilities can take the important steps needed to meet the seemingly competing priorities of the Sustainable Utility:

- *Environmental responsibility*. We had many sessions focused on carbon reduction by getting more from energy efficiency measures such as demand response and growing electrification, EV adoption, and distributed energy resources.

- *Reliability and resiliency.* Panel discussions dove into managing the demand increase from distributed resources with customers remaining at the center of all decisions.
- *Customer equity.* Equity was top of mind from several angles, including improving how we serve low- and moderate-income customers and small and midsize businesses in an equitable way. And how to help these groups of customers effectively participate and benefit from programs involving electrification, EVs, and more.
- *Financial stability.* In our opening keynote address, we discussed how collaborating with regulators and stakeholders is critical. We also highlighted our recommendations of taking a data-driven approach to facilitate decision-making now that robust capabilities are available.

As we look to 2023, you may wonder what it will truly take to become a Sustainable Utility. We have some highlights from the Forum that will help answer that question, starting with our opening plenary.

What do utilities and quilts have in common?

I had the pleasure to kick off the keynote address, delivered by Jennifer Montague, senior VP and chief customer officer at NiSource. The opening plenary set the stage with what it means to be a Sustainable Utility (**figure 1**). It also set the stage for a lot of fun at the Forum, with the fantastic suits our team put [Michael Carter](#), president of Research and Advisory, and me in. Our suits had an '80s theme, but I don't remember suits like these back then. Regardless, they were a fun surprise for all of us so check them out in the video below.

Figure 1: What it means to be a Sustainable Utility—Forum opening plenary



In her keynote address, Montague used the metaphor of a quilt to paint a mental picture of how utilities should best approach their strategies for becoming the Sustainable Utility—one that’s environmentally responsible, delivers safe and reliable energy equitably, and is financially stable. She shared the four main components of a quilt—anchor design, batting, foundational stitching, and border—and compared each component with an element of NiSource’s sustainability plan.

What are the components of a successful utility quilt?

People as the anchor design. Without an anchor design, a quilt is chaotic and lacks its defining beauty. The same applies to people in any proper sustainability plan.

Without a focus on people, a utility risks a hollow sustainability plan that’s missing the foundation from which all those repurposed scraps need to grow. If your utility’s plan is missing its anchor design—people—it should redesign its plans.

Customer experience (CX) improvements as the batting. Because people are central to your plan, it makes sense to support them in any way you can. CX is comparable to quilt batting. Batting provides warmth, making a quilt useful. In the same way, delivering excellent CX makes a utility useful.

As part of its sustainability plan, NiSource invested heavily in improving CX. We even honored NiSource with a [2022 Achievement in Customer Experience](#) award because of the utility’s focus on providing streamlined services and increased digital options for customers.

You can learn more about NiSource’s 2023 CX goals in an exclusive interview between Montague and [Filomena Gogel](#), senior VP of Management Consulting at E Source (**figure 2**).

Figure 2: What being a Sustainable Utility means to NiSource



Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) pillars as the foundational stitching. Foundational stitching is the most time-consuming step in quilting and involves connecting small pieces. In Montague’s metaphor, ESG pillars serve as the foundational stitching. Carter examined this more in depth during the fireside chat portion of the plenary:

ESG pillars are made up of granular concerns and practices that support all the work utilities are striving to do. Like in Montague’s quilting analogy, they take time to develop, but in the end, they hold everything together.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion as the border. Montague spoke about the importance of utilities leaving no one behind during the move into the future of energy. Everyone, regardless of race, gender, or economic status, should be embraced and connected—like how a border connects the components of a quilt—to benefit from the financial, environmental, economic, and social benefits provided by sustainable energy models.

Read even more about Montague’s address in our report [The quilt for a better tomorrow: A metaphor for the Sustainable Utility](#).

Key learnings from the E Source Forum 2022

Some of our experts came together to discuss some of the highlights and trends that emerged during the Forum.

The effects of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) on the battery market. During our November webinar [Key learnings from the E Source Forum 2022](#), we recalled how the recently passed IRA was on everyone’s mind. One of our panel discussions at the Forum dove into how utilities could prepare for the effects of the IRA on the battery market. And the E Source [Battery Next](#) team spoke on how to stay on top of pricing and track market changes.

CX improvements. It’s clear that enhancing customer experiences to be equitable and accessible is critical for 2023. We explored the ways utilities can work toward a more-accessible website experience by keeping a mobile-first mindset when it comes to web design. Most customers are on their phones and not at a desktop computer when an outage happens, so making sure the utility website is mobile friendly is key.

Employee experience. Equally important to the customer experience is the employee experience. One utility shared how it started weaving nonphone time into its employees’ workdays to help with retention and keep employees happy. The nonphone time helped reduce stress and burnout in a busy contact center, improving the employee experience greatly.

Customer-first decarbonization programs. We also focused on putting the customer first in decarbonization programs with the goal being to shift our mindset and look at decarbonization as a partnership *with* customers and not something happening *to* them. A utility shared how it approached Indigenous communities to learn from them and to determine the best way to build a program that would actually benefit them, rather than making assumptions about what these communities needed. From the experience, the utility learned what upset the community and what the community really wished they could see from its utility.

There's still a lot of work to do to become the Sustainable Utility, but here are a few things we recommend:

- Take advantage of all data available and let the data do the talking to embrace improved decision-making.
- Keep equity at the top of the priority list and work hard to identify clear metrics and goals to implement solutions.
- Increase commitment to accessibility to improve your digital strategy and aim for more-accessible websites that are mobile friendly.
- Embrace that some of your processes need to change to make way for electrification and equity and don't be shy about pushing the envelope to be successful in the face of change.

[Watch the webinar recording](#) to hear more about these insights. And make sure to save the date for [E Source Forum 2023](#), September 19-22.

We look forward to bringing you another year of the E News in 2023—same insightful thought leadership but with a fresh new look!