The future of disappointment

Designing for the inevitable in the age
of convenience – and grid instability

Contents

Welcome to the age of disappointment

In this era of convenience, when consumers can get anything they want, whenever they want, at the click of a button, only one thing is certain: **businesses will inevitably disappoint their customers**.

It's a strange truth. We live in an era of unprecedented capability — our collective appetite for e-commerce drives billions of same- and next-day package deliveries each year. Business today runs on seamless subscriptions, instant refunds, real-time tracking and one-tap everything. And yet, despite it all — or perhaps because of it — disappointment is everywhere.

The very systems built to delight us are the ones most prone to letting us down. A missed package. A canceled flight. A hotel room that isn't available when you arrive. A cold dinner. A denied claim. These aren't outliers — they're baked into these business models.

And yet, most companies still treat disappointment as an edge case, a design flaw, a failure. That mindset is the failure.

Disappointment is not a glitch – it's an opportunity

Let's be real. The sheer scale of modern logistics, hospitality, utilities and digital services makes some degree of disappointment not only possible but guaranteed. It's a math problem. When your company interacts with millions of people per day, issues are bound to arise – frequently, publicly and often unexpectedly.

So, the real question isn't how to avoid disappointment; it's how to design for it. Let's look at how some major players approach this challenge:

- A large airline carrier doesn't just send a generic "your flight is canceled" message. They've invested in rebooking automation, compensation transparency and frontline empathy.
- A large e-commerce retailer has normalized instant resolution for lost or stolen packages – sometimes before you even realize something's wrong. They've also embraced the reality that many items actually aren't worth the return shipping postage or the customer hassle; their strategy: refund and JKI – just keep it.

- A large third-party food delivery app might comp an order or issue partial credits with zero friction – making the customer feel heard without forcing a confrontation.
- A global hospitality leader, when they overbook, may "walk" you to another property, but how that's done – the tone, the alternatives, the perks – is carefully calibrated across brands and properties.

These moments of disappointment are not customer experience (CX) failures. They are the CX.

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The new outage reality

From California's wildfire-induced Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS), to hurricane-driven blackouts in the Southeast, to polar vortex events in Texas, power outages are no longer rare. They are expected. And with that, customer disappointment is no longer an exception – it's a core customer experience.

When the power goes out, customers don't just lose a service – they lose agency, comfort and sometimes safety. These moments are emotionally charged, and they demand a different level of care.

Utilities are increasingly expected to deliver not just power, but clarity, empathy and visibility. The EY outage experience framework introduces the Seven Rs – **restoration**, **response**, **reason**, **range**, **remediation, resumption** and **repetition** – as essential design elements for moments of disruption.

The Seven Rs help utilities:

- Communicate clearly about cause and status
- Provide timely restoration estimates
- Offer practical advice and emotional assurance
- Close the loop after recovery with proactive follow-up

In a world of increasing climate disruption, grid instability and rising expectations, utilities must view outage moments as brand-defining opportunities. Utilities now have access to real-time platforms that enable proactive, hyper-local communication, integrating grid data with customer behavior and channel preferences.

But these capabilities are not just operational. They are experiential. One needs to have clean, accessible data about the health and status of the grid, as well as a tight comms plan and a thoughtful tone of voice. This pairing of ops and experience marks the next frontier of disappointment design. EY research shows that brand trust drops over 100 points (out of 1,000) when customers don't receive timely, accurate information during an outage. That's not just dissatisfaction – that's strategic damage.

Utilities can't control the weather, but they can control how they communicate, how they recover and how they design the experience around the inevitable.

The Seven Rs – key components of outage experience communications

	1. Restoration	Estimated outage duration and expected restoration time frame
	2. Response	Status of outage response and details on restoration efforts
	3. Reason	Cause of planned or unplanned outage, incident, emergency, etc.
	4. Range	Geographic breadth of outage visualized with maps and charts
	5. Remediation	Safety tips to manage the outage period and re-energization
	6. Resumption	Restoration notification, response summary, feedback, remuneration
	7. Repetition	Regular, ongoing notifications and updates, actions taken, status

Not all disappointments (or outages) are equal

There are disappointments we can control and plan for – and those we can't. To design effectively, brands must first understand that disappointment comes in different forms:

Type of disappointment	Control level	Design approach
Predictable and preventable	High	Proactive transparency, frictionless recovery
Predictable but inevitable	Medium	Expectation-setting, personalized support
Unpredictable or chaotic	Low	Empathy-first, human-powered, adaptable responses

Knowing which kind of disappointment you are dealing with is half the battle. The rest is building the muscles to respond intentionally. When it comes to designing for utility outage experiences, outage types require tailored approaches:

Type of outage	Predictability	Strategic design approach
Planned maintenance	High	Notify early, provide rationale, suggest alternatives
PSPS events	Medium	Explain safety intent, acknowledge disruption, localize messaging
Severe weather	Low	Use real-time data, push timely updates, express empathy
Equipment failure	Low	Admit unpredictability, offer remediation, track estimated restoration time (ERT) closely

The worst dissatisfaction scores often come from partial outages with unclear causes – not because the outage is longer, but because customers are not provided with an explanation of why their power is out, why their neighbors' power isn't out, what's being done to address it and when they can expect it to be restored. Customers left in the dark (literally and figuratively) have a worse experience than those kept informed and updated.

The strategic advantage of disappointment

Here's the secret: some companies have turned disappointment into a differentiator. They've figured out how to take what should be a loyalty killer and use it to deepen emotional connection and, ultimately, shareholder value. Better customer satisfaction (CSAT) scores correlate to revenue growth, enhanced brand reputation, stock performance and reduced impact from negative CX events.

The winners are ones who:

- See disappointment as a designable experience
- Invest in tooling, training and principles to manage disappointments proactively
- Use data, empathy and creativity to make a bad moment a positive memory

And then there are the losers – companies that:

- Treat disappointment like an anomaly
- Rely on scripts, generic support channels, or worse – blame-shifting
- Try to optimize away disappointment rather than strategically engage with it

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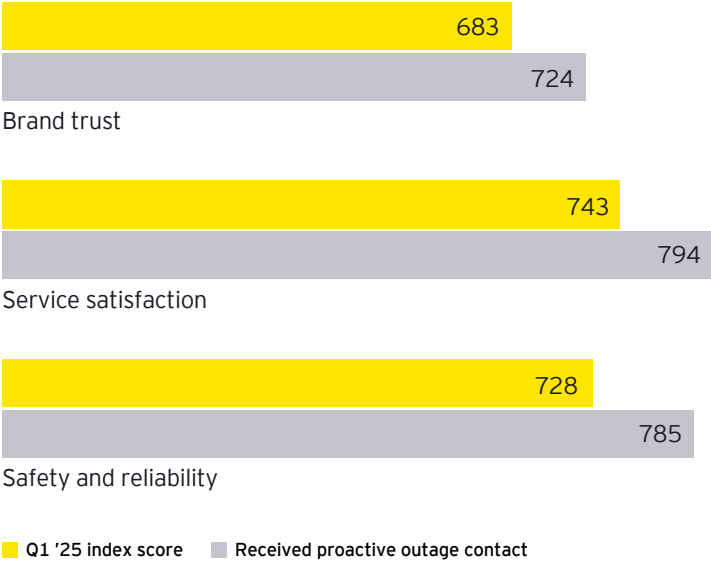
New principles for designing for disappointment

From work across industries, a clear set of design principles emerges for what can be called "disappointment experience" (DisX). These include:

Proactive expectation setting

Disappointment thrives in the delta between what was promised and what was delivered. The sooner and more clearly that gap is addressed, the less disruptive the emotional fallout. *Shrink that delta early*.

While utilities have improved their outage communication strategies, there is still work to be done. In a Cogent Syndicated Utility Trusted Brand & Customer Experience: Residential Q1 '25 study by Escalent, 22% of respondents who had experienced an outage over five minutes within the previous six months reported that their utility had proactively contacted them about the outage. Proactive communications impact safety and reliability scores, with recall of proactive communications correlating with 8% higher scores.

Index scores by recall of proactive outage communication (out of 1,000)

Brand trust
- 683 (Q1 '25 index score)
- 724 (Received proactive outage contact)

Service satisfaction
- 743 (Q1 '25 index score)
- 794 (Received proactive outage contact)

Safety and reliability
- 728 (Q1 '25 index score)
- 785 (Received proactive outage contact)

■ Q1 '25 index score ■ Received proactive outage contact

Data is residential Q1 '25 trailing 12-month scores for gas, electric and a combination of utility companies within the Escalent's Cogent Syndicated Q1 '25 study.

Personalized recovery paths

Not every customer experiences disappointment the same way. Some want acknowledgment. Some want an apology. Others want a refund. The ability to tailor responses to make a customer feel heard is increasingly critical. *Design for all of them*.

Customers provided with a post-outage resolution contact have 6% higher brand trust and service satisfaction scores and a 7% higher safety and reliability score.

Safety and reliability index scores by outage info recalled (out of 1,000)

Safety messages	814
What to do if power not back on by certain time	796
Community resource centers	794
How to obtain additional outage information	790
Reason/cause of the outage	763
Time outage began	747
Updated estimated restoration time (ERT)	744
Field crews were responding	741
Number of people affected	735
Estimated time until service restoration	732
No outage info received	599
Q1 '25 safety and reliability index score	728

Data is residential Q1 '25 trailing 12-month scores for gas, electric and a combination of utility companies within the Escalent's Cogent Syndicated Q1 '25 study.

Emotional UX

This is about more than interface or copywriting – it's about tone, language, timing and the emotional intelligence of the moment. The way something is said often matters more than what is said. *Does it sound like someone cares?*

MS Power, a top-scoring utility for safety and reliability, proactively provides information to their customers in a way that lets customers know MS Power cares about them and their safety.
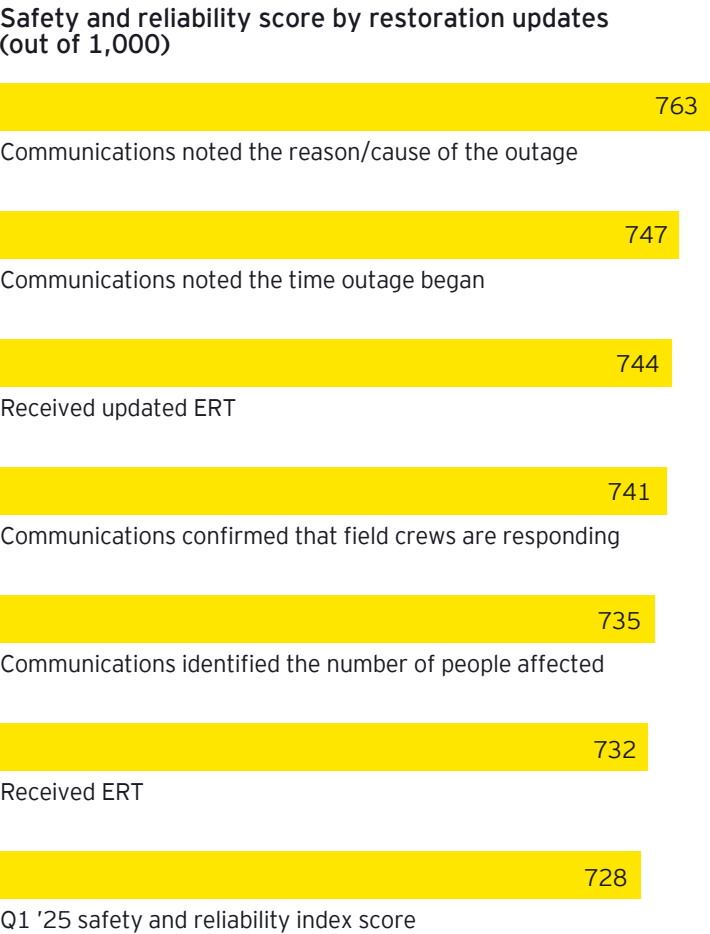
Source: Mississippi Power's Post, "There's power in a plan," *Facebook*, February 15, 2025

More than **50%** of respondents who experienced an outage longer than five months in the last six months reported that an ERT was shared; **33%** recalled receiving an updated ERT.

Speed-to-empathy

In high-stakes moments, customers don't just want information – they want reassurance. A timely, human-centered touchpoint can shift an experience from frustrating to forgivable. *The faster a customer feels seen and understood, the more likely they are to forgive – and even advocate.*

As the restoration process proceeds, sharing updates and reassurance with customers as it becomes available (e.g., field crews responding, ERT, updated ERT) has a positive impact on safety and reliability scoring. In Q1 '25, more than 50% of respondents who experienced an outage longer than five minutes in the last six months reported that an ERT was shared; 33% recalled receiving an updated ERT.
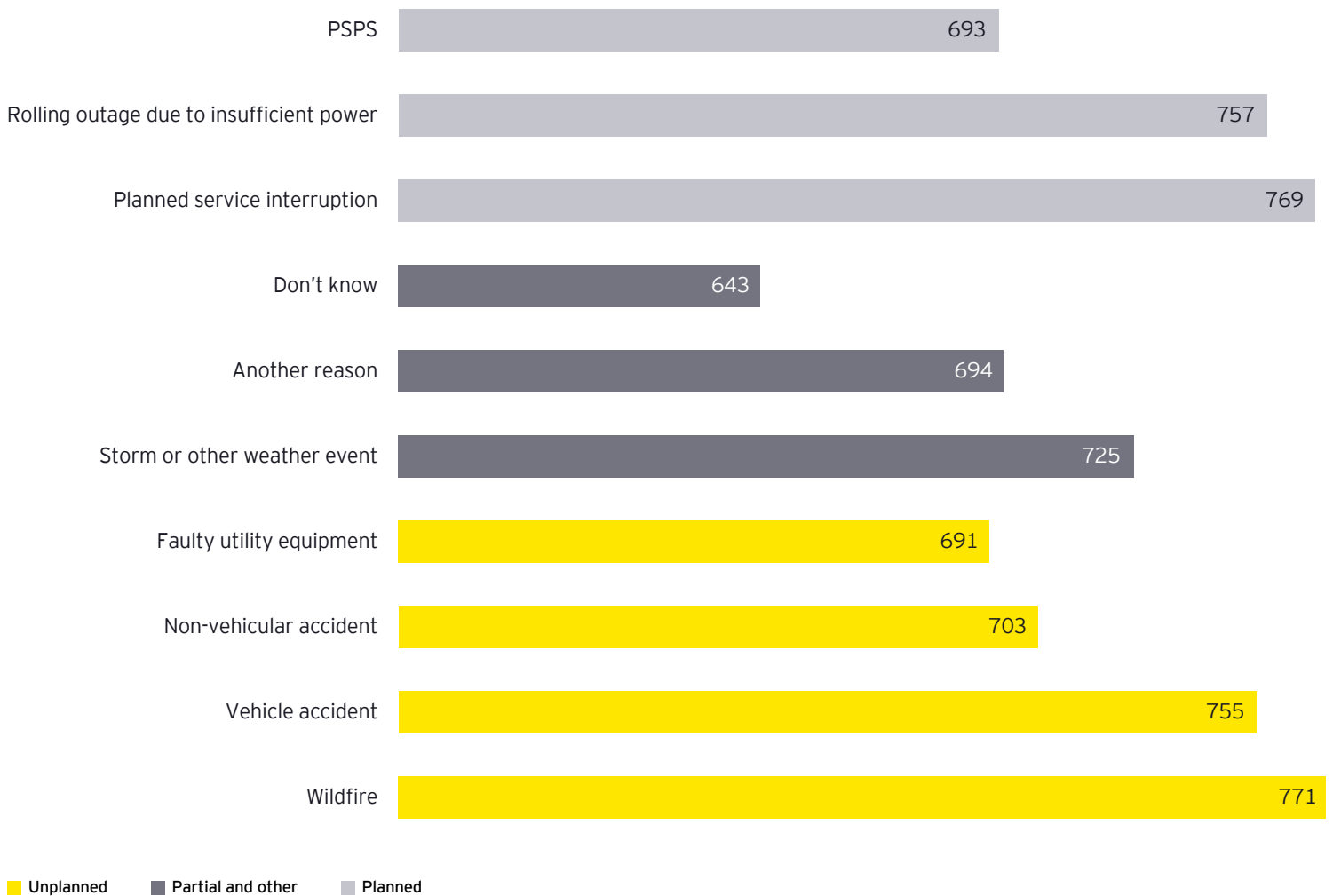
Safety and reliability score by restoration updates (out of 1,000)

	Score
Communications noted the reason/cause of the outage	763
Communications noted the time outage began	747
Received updated ERT	744
Communications confirmed that field crews are responding	741
Communications identified the number of people affected	735
Received ERT	732
Q1 '25 safety and reliability index score	728

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Design for the worst day, not the best

Too many journeys are designed for the ideal scenario. The best ones start from the assumption that something will go wrong – and build in the resilience, responsiveness and grace to navigate it well. *Start with the fail state, then build up from there*.

Across various planned, unplanned or partial outages, the lowest safety and reliability scores are for outages that are unplanned and have no clear cause. Scores can be improved for all types of outages if they are designed for.

Safety and reliability index score (out of 1,000)

Category	Score
PSPS	693
Rolling outage due to insufficient power	757
Planned service interruption	769
Don't know	643
Another reason	694
Storm or other weather event	725
Faulty utility equipment	691
Non-vehicular accident	703
Vehicle accident	755
Wildfire	771

■ Unplanned   ■ Partial and other   ■ Planned

Data is residential Q1 '25 trailing 12-month scores for gas, electric and a combination of utility companies within the Escalent's Cogent Syndicated Q1 '25 study.

Personalization and agentic AI in the next frontier

Agentic artificial intelligence (AI) may be an incredible catalyst in this arena — first, by reducing the human errors that often trigger avoidable disappointments, and second, by dynamically personalizing the disappointment experience.

Today's customer doesn't just want to know the power is out. They want to know why *their* power is out, when *their* lights will come back on, what *they* should do in the meantime and how *they* will be compensated or protected.

This is where agentic AI and platforms like EY UtilityWave come in. Agentic AI has the potential to transform how disappointment is sensed, personalized and resolved at scale. When powered by integrated grid and customer data, these tools allow organizations to tailor messages by neighborhood, outage type and customer profile.

Here's where it gets interesting:

- **Prevention:** AI can prevent some disappointments before they happen (think: predictive issue detection, real-time rerouting).
- **Personalization:** AI can adjust the disappointment response — like proactive updates, faster service escalations or refund offers — based on individual customer preferences, tone, history and even mood.
- **Variability:** Not every customer needs the same script. AI allows brands to scale custom emotional responses.
- **Memory:** Agentic systems can remember past disappointments and resolve them holistically, not as isolated issues.

The result: Customers experience faster resolutions that are most likely to address *their* needs.

The future isn't just about notifying customers. It's about **understanding who they are, what they value and how they prefer to receive bad news**.

With the EY Outage Experience dashboards powered by EY UtilityWave, we not only provide insight but design, build and operate customized tools and applications, deployed on an EY-developed, EY-managed cloud-based Microsoft Azure platform and infrastructure.

Accuracy of information

To deliver critical location and restoration estimates during outages, utilities must integrate data across systems to accurately match customer, address and meter information and track restoration estimates closely.

1

Timing of notifications

Utilities can improve their management of restorations if they track inbound and outbound interactions by channel and timing. This will reduce inbound call volume and improve communication to customers.

2

Channels for communications

To provide more targeting communications (which customers expect), utilities should compile data on preferred channels, segmentation, notification history and voice of the customer (VoC) feedback. With this data, they should personalize communications and strategically determine the best frequency and channel for notifications.

3

This is what we do

We don't just study disappointment. We design for it – and with it.

We work with companies to:

- Map and classify disappointment vectors across the customer journey
- Develop emotional UX strategies for high-friction moments
- Prototype AI-driven recovery tools that scale human empathy
- Turn liability touchpoints into brand-building opportunities

Disappointment isn't going anywhere. But your response to it? That's where loyalty is won or lost. When disappointment is treated as a designable moment, not just a metric, customers respond with trust.

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The future
of disappointment

Disappointment is no longer a CX failure. It's a **strategic frontier**.

It tells you where expectations are misaligned. It reveals what customers truly care about. It offers a moment to demonstrate empathy, responsiveness and leadership.

In the power and utilities space, where stakes are high and trust is fragile, those who design for disappointment will win the next era of customer loyalty.

Let's turn your toughest moments into your strongest brand signals.

Let's design the future of DisX – together.

Let's turn your **toughest** moments into your **strongest** brand signals.

Ernst & Young LLP contacts

We are ready to help you improve the customer outage experience. To find out more, please contact:

AUTHORED BY

Alex Stock
Innovation
US Customer Business Innovation Leader
alex.stock@ey.com

ADDITIONAL CONTRIBUTORS

Joanne Campbell
US-West Power & Utilities
Customer Experience Managing Director
joanne.campbell@ey.com

Baret Chakarian
Power & Utilities
Customer Experience and Business Transformation
Senior Manager
baret.m.chakarian@ey.com

Colin Skowronski
Power & Utilities
Customer Experience and Business Transformation
Manager
colin.skowronski@ey.com

Timothy Cheung
Innovation
Customer Business Innovation Manager
timothy.cheung@ey.com

Megan Walsh
Innovation
Customer Business Innovation Manager
megan.e.walsh@ey.com

Adrienne Hogan
Innovation
Customer Business Innovation Senior Consultant
adrienne.hogan@ey.com

Anna Worrell
Power & Utilities
Customer Experience Senior Consultant
anna.worrell@ey.com

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