It's a Fuel Eat Fuel World

By Tom Coolidge

Energy for heat, hot water and cooking to homes and businesses are very competitive markets for natural gas and electric distribution utilities. Today these utilities continue their long-running battle to gain share at the other's expense. Generally, the winner in the choice of fuel type for home heating has some advantage in the competition for the choice of energy used in hot water and cooking. But this is not for sure. In any case, the competition is intense and the stakes are high.

At times, natural gas distribution industry executives responsible for customer growth are understandably a bit envious of their water distribution and electric distribution peers. After all, virtually every household and business has both water and electricity service and it's unheard of their discontinuing use of either. That's not the case for natural gas.

While natural gas is an attractive energy choice for a number of reasons, natural gas utilities work hard to make sure prospective customers understand its advantages and choose it as their preferred fuel. This effort often starts with pro-active economic development to attract businesses and industry to their service territory. And, marketing analytics are applied to project the size and location of expected population and business growth. Often this involves collaboration with local government planners and real estate developers. Housing starts, building permits for renovations and additions, and many other data records are analyzed in the process to help assure good decisions are being made.

Common to all of these data records is location. We all know the saying about why businesses and homeowners buy where they do: location, location, location. GIS understandably is key to assisting gas utilities in their customer growth initiatives. For this reason, ArcGIS for Gas Utilities includes a number of pre-configurations of the ArcGIS platform focused on this business need.

Gas Service Lookup is a configuration of ArcGIS Online for the public to view if gas service is available for a given location. This app can be embedded on the utility's website and not used as a standalone app. The utility can optionally use this app as a marketing or customer service tool by enabling the request tracking feature to store the location of each point used in the service lookup.

The Upselling to Existing Customers solution can be used to identify customers likely to buy additional services. The solution uses Esri Maps for Office to map the location of customers and

geoenrich the data to identify ideal customers for a gas furnace upgrade. The results can then be published to your ArcGIS Online organization to share with specific groups within your utility.

The Potential New Customer solution allows a utility to identify potential new customers that are near a gas main. This is done by identifying parcels with no gas meters and comparing these parcels with the location of existing gas mains. The results are then published to ArcGIS Online and exported to an Excel spreadsheet for the marketing department.

Beyond these focused maps, apps and services, the ArcGIS platform provides easy-to-use and powerful capabilities to support sales and marketing to prospective gas customers. Field staff can use the platform for data collection, such as surveys to locate and record the estimated size of above-ground propane tanks. These businesses and homes are ideal candidates for conversion to piped gas. Tablets and smartphones are great devices in the hands of salespeople calling on business and industrial candidates.

Competition among electric and gas utilities to earn the business of economically attractive new customers is expected to continue for many years. In this battle for business, the outlook for continued growth in the number of houses and businesses using natural gas is very positive. This outlook is "fueled" in part by the growing ability of the ArcGIS platform to enable gas utility employees and contractors to discover, use, make, and share relevant maps anywhere, anytime, and on any device.