



# TRUSTPOWER – IMPROVING EFFICIENCY WITHOUT COMPROMISE

Renowned for their customer-focussed approach, Trustpower wanted to increase time-on-route for their meter readers, and equip them with commodity-priced handhelds, without compromising the company's excellent customer service reputation.

### SUMMARY

#### Customer

Trustpower, one of New Zealand's major generators and retailers of electricity

#### Challenge

Enable meter reading force to increase time on route and move to commodity priced, open handsets

#### Solution

DataCol's SevenX solution

#### Outcome

Improved meter reading efficiency without compromising customer service

### POWERED BY CUSTOMERS

Customer focus is a defining feature of New Zealand energy company Trustpower, a publicly owned company listed on the local stock exchange with assets of NZ\$2.5 billion. Trustpower is 51% owned by Infratil which in turn owns Infratil Energy Australia (Lumo and Perth Energy) with customers throughout Australia. The company has consistently been recognized in independent surveys as the country's top service provider.

With the lowest number of customer complaints in the sector, as measured by the Electricity and Gas Complaints Commission, Trustpower balances outstanding service with highly efficient operations, achieving one of the lowest "cost to serve" ratios in New Zealand.

Trustpower operates in the New Zealand electricity market as a generator and retailer of electricity, and a provider of phone and internet services. It generates electricity from 47 power stations, 29 of which are hydro. More than 260,000 customers, covered by more than 500,000 electricity meters, are serviced by the company, representing 13% of the New Zealand retail electricity market.

### RESISTING THE RUSH TO SMART METERING

With a reputation as New Zealand's smartest electricity retailer, Trustpower has been cautious about early adoption of smart metering technology, choosing instead to remain focussed on what delivers the most robust result for customers at a reasonable cost.

Trustpower is not ignoring the roll out of smart metering in New Zealand," says Stuart Milsom, Trustpower's field service manager retail. "We are very aware of what is going on and are trialling technology that includes taking data feeds from smart meters, but we are not rushing into it overnight."

Milsom says Trustpower doesn't believe that smart metering technology is at a point to deliver a reasonable return on investment, noting "the customer value proposition just isn't there yet."

With smart meters five to ten times more expensive than a conventional meter, it is an area of significant capital investment for any energy company. While fast technological change should drive down the cost of smart metering over time, it is still an emerging technology when compared with traditional metering approaches.

Trustpower has an extensive network of meter readers presently, and sees them as their "eyes and ears" in the communities they serve. For example, the meter readers discover 20% of any metering faults, ranging from broken equipment to dishonesty offences, something smart meters are thought unlikely to replicate as effectively.

"We are something of a rarity in our industry, having in the interests of better customer service chosen to employ our own meter readers, rather than contract the function out. As a consequence, we have meter readers in our uniform and driving Trustpower branded vehicles spread as far afield as Kaitaia, Invercargill, Gisborne, New Plymouth, Timaru and Greymouth, which gives us a true nationlong and wide data collection service," says Milsom.

Given the company's position on smart metering, and its commitment to maintaining its own meter reading field force, Trustpower keeps an on-going focus on the efficiency of the manual meter reading and strives for continual improvement. The technology supporting the field force was one area where the company believed it could achieve gains.



### AN OPEN PLATFORM FOR ACHIEVING MORE

After evaluating several vendors, Trustpower decided to move to a new meter reading platform – SevenX from the New Zealand-based company, DataCol.

The SevenX multi-commodity solution consists of an application running on commercially available, non-proprietary, ruggedized, IP67 compliant handheld computers communicating with a back office management system over cellular networks (e.g. GPRS, CDMA, 3G) networks. It also integrates data from other transfer modes such as the web and AMR. As such, SevenX provides a single interface to the utility billing system (e.g. Gentrack, SAP, Agility) for timely, accurate and consistent billing.

“Our ambition is to read multiple commodities including electricity, water and gas, and SevenX enabled that,” says Milsom. “The fact that DataCol use the SevenX software themselves to undertake meter reading in New Zealand and are actively selling it in Australia gave us confidence.”

Another real attraction was being able to use a standard handheld computing and communication device that could do data collection, as well as being a camera, email device and a phone. In the past Trustpower meter readers would have to travel with their handheld data collection device, a camera and a phone.

Trustpower is renowned for the efficiency of its meter reading force, and says Milsom “it is regularly complimented by industry leaders and authorities for the quality of the service it provides, and for achieving some of the best data attainment results in the electricity industry.”

Since implementing SevenX, Trustpower has judged it could further streamline the operation of the meter reading force, such as being able to do off-cycle reads more easily.

### EFFICIENCY WITHOUT COMPROMISING SERVICE QUALITY

Milsom says SevenX supports Trustpower’s focus on achieving highly efficient meter reading without compromising customer service quality, i.e. minimizing the cost-to-serve ratio but retaining good quality customer service.

“Our attainment rates are 98.5% which are right up there for New Zealand. We could have a slightly slower attainment rate by cutting costs more, but the trade-off for customer service is not worth it.” Trustpower is able to increase the time-on-route of readers every day by reducing the need for them to visit a central point, using this additional time to get cyclic readers to undertake other tasks such as special readings.

Supervisors can also manage a larger meter reading area and a higher population of readers, and spend less time assigning and managing routes, and checking reader progress by phone. In terms of back office information, analysis of historical data within SevenX Electricity allows better identification of issues and potential service improvements to utility clients. Analysis by readers, routes and customers can be done to identify and tackle opportunities for improving service levels.

Milsom points out that there is also health and safety benefits for the field force, as Trustpower knows where they are in real time and can provide assistance quickly if required.

“We’ve gone from meter readers having a handheld device, phone and camera to one device that can do it all. That means they can collect and send back data more quickly to be actioned (e.g. meter faults) and the team here can then organize a fix quicker by knowing exactly where people are in the field.”

Feedback from the field about SevenX has been positive. “The way meter readers collect their data hasn’t radically changed but they are now able to do a lot more with their device.”

## DATA COL CASE STUDY



### FUTURE FOCUSED STRATEGY

Trustpower have continued to innovate, adopting a number of SevenX upgrades says Bruce Franks, Business Development, DataCol. "A key addition has been the non-scheduled module, which manages any kind of out-of-cycle or special meter reads."

With SevenX, Trustpower can send any non-scheduled or check reads to the nearest available meter reader, or allocate all off-cycle reads to a specific person in a specific area. All the reading data is then automatically uploaded into the billing system. The meter reader can use the SevenX app on their smartphone to take photos, record the GPS location and record any other notes.

"It represents a major efficiency gain in scheduling off-cycle reads, and the associated cost reduction. Customer service also improves, with off-cycle reads completed faster, and thorough information about any of these reads available to customer service staff to deal with billing queries."

The kind of 'smart approach' Trustpower takes is attracting interest in Australia particularly, says Bruce. "Given the Victorian experience there is a lot of wariness of the expensive AMI route. With Itron's FC300 reaching end of life, the increasing pressure from the Power of Choice reforms, and new technology possibilities like Internet of Things (IoT), Australian utilities are looking at meter reading approaches that give them breathing space."

By implementing SevenX to drive a highly efficient MMR and AMR approach, utilities can be really confident their data and business processes for meter reading are solid, while preparing for the next technology step, such as an IoT solution. SevenX also gives them a future pathway for any customers that can't for whatever reason be serviced by fully automated meter data collection strategies.

### ABOUT DATA COL GROUP

The task of implementing an Intelligent Network such as infrastructure, data collection and analysis, is a complex one. Utilities and Councils need a partner with significant expertise and proven experience to execute and implement the metering and data collection plan.

A single solution provider with the breadth of services that include deploying smart meters, contract meter reading, data collection and analysis will always be far more preferable over dealing with multiple entities that can perform only parts of the project.

The DataCol Group, is a fully owned subsidiary of Arthur D. Riley and Co Ltd, a company supplying and servicing the utility industry with special emphasis on electricity and metering, and high voltage equipment for distribution networks.

From process consulting to field services including contract meter reading and management reporting – DataCol is the solution partner bringing fresh ideas and capabilities to the table.

If you would like any clarification or to have a further discussion around metering and everything involved, please get in touch to see how we can work together.

[www.datacolgroup.com](http://www.datacolgroup.com)