

ENERGY RETAIL

What are customers saying?

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[Company strategy](#), [Customers](#), [Energy retail](#), [Strategy & management](#), [Analysis](#)

Online consumer reviews are now widely used and increasingly influential. What are these customers saying about energy suppliers? And are suppliers listening? How does experience in energy supply compare to other sectors and other types of organisation?

Recent research on the use of Trustpilot by customers and companies shows that most energy suppliers – but not all – come out looking better than banks, supermarkets and mobile phone companies. But advisory and regulatory bodies, not so much.

The use of Trustpilot

Trustpilot, launched in the UK in 2014, enables any customer to review any business whenever it chooses. It now has over 37 million reviews of nearly 100,000 UK businesses, including almost all energy suppliers. Customers rate companies from one star (Bad) to five stars (Excellent). Trustpilot publishes online all the reviews, and calculates and constantly updates each company's TrustScore from 1 to 5, weighting newer reviews more highly than older ones.

Some companies ignore these Trustpilot reviews, others acknowledge or "claim" their Trustpilot site, invite reviews and reply to some of them and use the feedback to improve their customer service. Trustpilot provides various facilities for companies to invite and reply to reviews but the scores and publication of reviews are independent of whether a company subscribes to these extra services.

Experience suggests that companies that ignore Trustpilot get mainly critical reviews from disappointed customers. Inviting reviews and, importantly, using the customer feedback to improve customer service, generally brings a balance of better reviews. Some companies have learned this and thought it worth responding, others have not. Table 1 reports on a few major UK sectors.

Table 1: Trustpilot reviews of five UK sectors in June 2020

Sector	Supermarkets	Banks	Mobiles	Energy	Charitable & Regulatory
Number of companies	12	52	22	44	10
Median TrustScore	2.15	2.75	2.7	4.1	1.45
Trustpilot category	Poor	Poor-Ave	Poor	Good	Bad

Median reviews 12 mths	1,188	271	991	1,193	48
Range reviews 12 mths	286 – 7,753	3 – 8,436	3 – 16,612	1 – 28,119	11 – 285
% sites claimed	67%	79%	91%	96%	60%
% subscribing	0%	39%	73%	76%	0%
% inviting	8%	37%	36%	71%	0%
% replying	17%	48%	64%	87%	40%

Over the last 12 months, the median number of customer reviews per company was around one thousand in supermarkets, mobile phones and energy supply, though only 271 in banking (admittedly including more smaller companies there). The range was very great: in energy from one review for one new entrant (GoEffortless) to over 28,000 reviews for Bulb.

Two thirds of the 12 supermarkets claimed their Trustpilot sites, but they were not very interested: none of them subscribed to Trustpilot services, only one of them invited customers to send reviews, and only two replied to any customer reviews. The 52 banks and 22 mobile operators were moderately interested in Trustpilot.

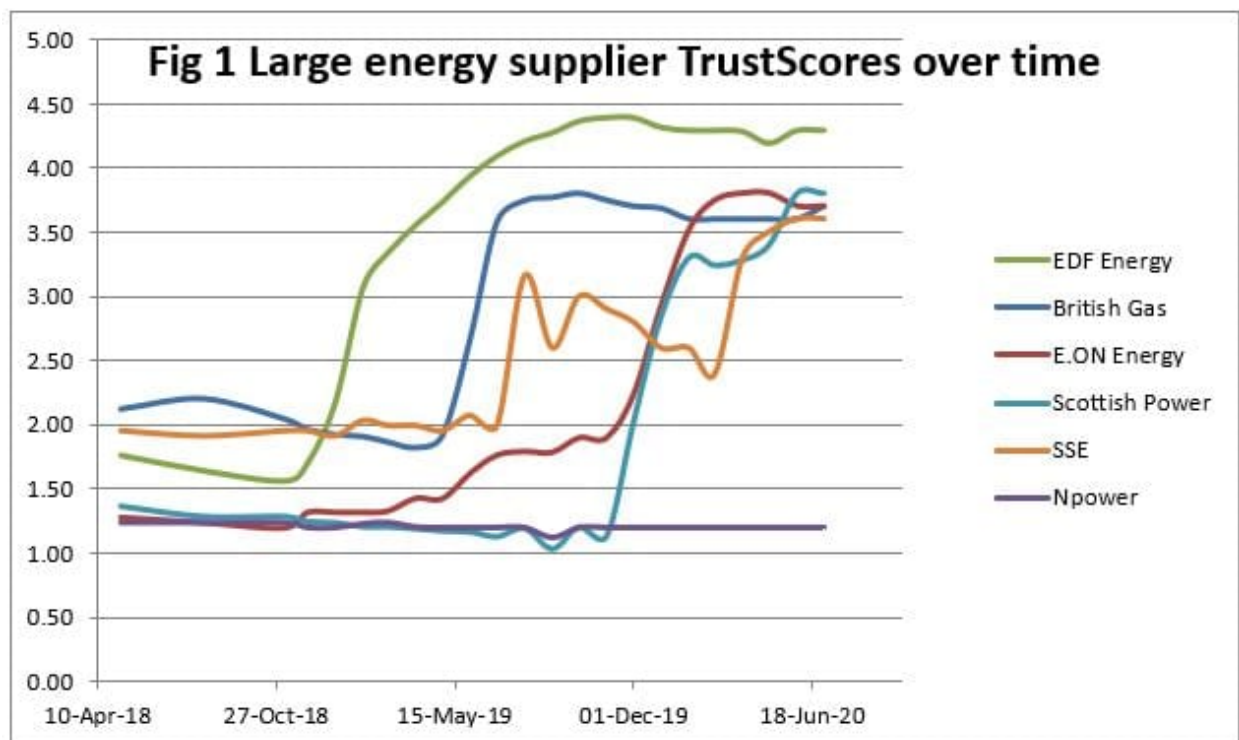
The most active users were the 44 energy suppliers: almost all claimed their sites, three quarters subscribed to Trustpilot services, most of them invited reviews and 87 per cent replied to at least some customer reviews.

This attention to customers – or lack of it – was reflected in the median TrustScores: only 2.15 out of 5 for supermarkets, and about 2.7 for banks and mobiles, all of which Trustpilot categorises as “poor”. I

contrast, the median energy supplier scored 4.1: “good”. No less than 15 suppliers were “excellent”.

Medium suppliers Shell and Ovo led the way in inviting Trustpilot reviews, followed by Bulb and Octopus Energy. Octopus, in particular, has explained the vital importance of Trustpilot customer feedback in identifying customer service problems and how to deal with them.

Initially, the six large energy suppliers scored “poor” or even “bad”, and ignored Trustpilot reviews. Over the last two years, however, first EDF then four others have gradually invited reviews and responded to the customer feedback. Figure 1 shows the resulting increases in Trustscores from the range 1.2 – 2.2 to the range 3.6 – 4.4. Only Npower did not adopt this policy, and its TrustScore remained around 1.2 (and it has since been taken over by Eon).



For the most part, energy suppliers are now responsive to customer Trustpilot, certainly compared to other sectors. Furthermore, although

not shown in Table 1, price comparison websites, switching services and energy consultancies advising businesses are almost all rated “excellent” or “good”.

In contrast, the final column of Table 1 paints a grim picture of ten charitable and regulatory organisations in and around the energy sector, including five Ombudsman bodies for energy and other sectors.

These bodies don’t get so many reviews – median about 50 a year – but almost all these organisations are rated as “bad”. Four of the ten don’t even acknowledge their site, none invites reviews, and only four reply to reviews.

Surely the services they provide can’t be as bad as the Trustpilot reviews and scores suggest? Would there not be merit in moving with the times and proactively working with customers to improve their performance and the public perception of these valuable organisations?