

Delivering a Personalized Experience: The Multichannel Contact Center

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Whether your goal is to provide the best customer experience possible, increase sales, or reduce costs, the multichannel contact center delivers. Because customer want - and demand - access to customer service and support via their channel or media of choice, supporting a voice-only channel is no longer an option. The question is not if you should support multiple interaction channels, but which channels you will deploy and when you will deploy them.

Because customers can take their business elsewhere with the click of a mouse or swipe of an iPhone device, the need to manage the customer experience has never been more important. By keeping customers engaged as they browse and shop your website, your company can increase sales by increasing the number of shopping carts that make it through your virtual checkout line.

In the 1990s the rise of the Internet made it possible for businesses and organizations to interact with customers through a variety of media including email, web chat, and web call back. Fast forward to today, when even pre-teens have multimodal mobile devices with additional interaction channels, and the new norm has become instant messaging, short message service (SMS), video, and social media.

By offering customers a variety of ways to reach your business, and by using contact center tools that enable more personalized and well-tailored interactions, your company can enhance customer relationships, optimize the customer experience, reduce costs and make the most of each sales opportunity.

A 2011 study conducted by Customer Care Measurement & Consulting found that, in order to get a problem solved, consumers must contact a company an average of 4.4 times, that consumer loyalty and satisfaction drop significantly after the customer makes a second call and then all but disappear after the third call. Consumer Preference eBook (CPE) found that 6% of consumers consider defecting after only two-to-three attempts to make contact and 5% consider closing an account or going to another company after a single failed attempt. On the positive side, according to an article in the Wall Street Journal (April, 2011), 70% of consumers are willing to spend more money with a company that provides good customer service while 15% of consumers said they would spend 20% more with companies that provide good service.



Giving Customers What They Want: Choice in Communication Channels

Beyond voice and telephony, the multitude of channels through which customers and companies can interact include email, web chat, web call back, SMS, video, and even social media. Although many of these channels have been around for over a decade, some are new to the world of customer care.

Here's a quick look at these channels and the impacts they can have on your business.

Web Chat and Co-Browsing

Web chat (often called text chat) enables a customer to have an interactive session with an agent via text rather than voice. Web chat can be proactive and/or reactive. For example, a proactive customer can click a button on your web site to initiate an interactive text conversation with an agent and an agent can react by texting back and/or by pushing web pages to the customer. Co-browsing comes into play when an agent needs to walk a customer through a site and/or direct a customer to specific pages and pertinent information.

By assisting a website shopper, an agent can increase the value of a sale by suggesting products and items that the customer may be interested in. While shopping on one of my favorite clothing websites, for example, I was unsure as to which size to order so I clicked the "Live Chat" button. After helping me with product sizing, the agent suggested other items similar in style to the item I was looking at then pushed web pages for those items to my computer. Based on her suggestions, I bought several items which I would not have purchased had she not assisted me using web chat and co-browsing.

Web chat can also be used proactively when a customer has placed several items in a shopping cart but has not completed the transaction and/or when a customer has clicked several links on a support page. In such scenarios, a "May I help you?" text window can be configured to pop up. If the customer accepts the chat session, the agent can answer questions, resolve issues, etc. This capability should be used judiciously to avoid the possibility of scaring off customers.

Web Call Back

No one likes waiting on hold and, with web call back, customers can avoid the wait by requesting that an agent call them at a specific time. To request a call back, the customer simply presses a "call me" button on the web page, enters a phone number, and a preferred time for the call back. When the "preferred

time” arrives, the call back request is queued to the agent along with a screen pop containing the customer’s history of transactions and other details including what the customer was looking at before requesting the call back.

In addition to web call back or as an alternative, a web site can be configured to display the current wait time for live agent assistance which, for some contact centers, is enough to alleviate wait time fatigue and give customers a sense of control.

Email

When seeking customer service and support, many customers prefer email. This is easy to understand because, with email, there is no need to wait on hold or go through a menu of options and email can be sent anytime during or outside of business hours.

Most business websites provide an email link addressed to `service@company.com` or `sales@company.com` which, in theory, is great. In practice, however, as more and more customers use such links and demand a higher level of service and response, the burden on companies to support the increased volume of email these links generate becomes critical.

Email response teams are often used to respond to the burgeoning stack of email but, in most cases, these response teams are separate; they sit in silos outside of the contact center. Without these teams, however, customer emails can fall through the cracks and, all too often, they do not get a response or the response takes way too long. When their email is ignored, customers typically pick up the phone and call which, in general, raises your cost of doing business.

By integrating email into the contact center your business can more effectively manage email generated from your website and, by queuing these messages to trained agents, can reply to customers in a reasonable amount of time. Replying to a customer via email has the added benefit of enabling the inclusion of additional information such as marketing materials, manuals, forms, links, etc. within them.

Video

The jury is still out regarding the value added when customers and agents can see one other. In many cases, the answer will be that no value is added but, in other cases, video makes strong business sense.

For very high-end purchases, personalization can be the difference between closing the deal and an abandoned cart. For service and support, agents can stream instructional “how to” videos and/or demonstrate how to fix a problem.

Video is also useful, for example, when a subject matter expert, who can be located anywhere around the globe, answers customer questions via a video kiosk. In cases like these, the ability of customer and agent to see one other can definitely make a difference.

Demographics also play a role. More comfortable with video than previous generations, the younger generation will expect video in customer service situations. While video interactions are accessed easily via PC, tablet, smartphone, kiosk, or interactive digital TV, they pose a challenge when a customer does not want to be seen by an agent. For customers like these, applications are available that allow them to control whether or not an agent can view them. And, keep in mind that agents who are seen should be well groomed, properly attired, and in an environment that is conducive to video, such as a location with sufficient bandwidth.

The key to video is figuring out when and for whom it is appropriate.

Short Message Service (SMS)

Not yet a widely used contact center channel, SMS is an option that some companies are exploring. The popularity among teenagers of texting on mobile devices makes it easy to understand the impact texting will have as customer service evolves.

In customer care today, SMS is most commonly used for outbound notifications and proactive customer service such as appointment reminders and is thought of by some as web chat for mobile devices. Using a mobile device, for example, a customer can send a text to a customer support phone number, connect with an agent, and then continue interacting via SMS or text. Agents manage SMS sessions in the same manner as email and web chat.

Social Media

Many customers find Twitter or Facebook much quicker and easier to use than traditional contact center channels. While still in its early days, the incorporation of Facebook and Twitter as customer service channels is on the increase as customers turn to such venues to complain, ask questions, get information, or just to vent.

When my cable TV wasn't working, for example, rather than call my cable company and navigate through its IVR menu, I tweeted them to ask if service was out in my area. Responding immediately, a representative asked for my zip code then confirmed that indeed there was a service issue in my area. This increased my faith in my cable company and made me feel that my issues matter to them!

Successful integration of social media into the contact center involves:

- Monitoring and listening to what your customers are saying
- Acting and responding to customers
- Optimizing the customer experience by engaging with them

The list of companies who interact with customers via social media grows daily. Based on my discussions with organizations about their use of social media, it is clear that most social media initiatives begin in marketing where they escalate quickly out of control and, as a result, are brought into customer care centers where trained agents manage them. I expect that, more and more, social media will be incorporated into the customer service operation and handled by customer service agents.

The incorporation of social media into customer care presents an opportunity but it must be controlled and monitored carefully. Instead of making the mistake of throwing more and/or untrained employees into the social media mix, which increases costs, businesses should opt to manage social media by incorporating it into their contact center infrastructure, including reporting, skill based routing, and other capabilities.

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Keep in mind that it is not necessary to respond to every tweet or Facebook post. Just monitor and listen to what's being said about your company, follow your established policies and procedures about when and how to join a conversation, interact, and respond to comments and questions. Some businesses who manage a large volume of social interactions turn to technology to analyze, categorize, and deliver social media interactions to their contact center instead of trying to accomplish this manually and, depending on the volume and type of social media interactions in play, these businesses also deploy advanced applications to ensure that only agents with the appropriate skills respond to and engage with customers.

Unlike more traditional channels, very few best practices, metrics, and KPIs have been established for social media. How long should it take to respond to a tweet or Facebook post? How can customers be identified when their twitter handles are not their real names? The experience and data required to answer questions like these are being gathered by businesses who have adopted social media as a customer communication channel and, should your company decide to incorporate social media, you would do well to find and consult with such companies.

Mobility

The prevalence of mobile and smart devices is causing contact center managers to re-think how to take advantage of them as modes of effective

customer service. Many businesses, banking for example, offer touchtone and voice activated applications to help customers engage in self service but -- what happens when such applications are not enough and a customer wants to connect with a live agent? The customer will most likely call into the contact center, and the agent will have no idea who the customer is, why the customer is calling, or which transactions the customer attempted or completed using their mobile device.

With the advent of more advanced mobile applications, today's mobile-device wielding customers can navigate through self-service options by using a menu that can be downloaded to and viewed on their device. Using this application, customers can connect with a live agent or request a call back from an agent who will know who they are and what their recent mobile activity has been.

When devising a mobility strategy for your customer care operation, it is important to put customer convenience at the heart of your strategy.

Eliminating Silos: The Multichannel Contact Center

How often have you heard something like this from a customer?

"I sent your company an email describing issues I am having but you never got back to me so I called your company and spoke to an agent who didn't know anything about me, my problem, or the email I sent! Having to explain my issue all over again really made me angry."

Probably more often than you'd like.

A consequence of siloed contact centers, situations like these can be avoided with an integrated multichannel contact center in which agents can share customer case history information regardless of the channel through which an interaction arrives. In an integrated multichannel contact center, all voice, email, and chat sessions, etc. are handled by a common system, agent desktops are unified, interactions from all channels are queued universally and easily routed, and recording, reporting, and workforce optimization capabilities are leveraged by and across all channels.

By breaking down silos, integrated multichannel contact centers enhance customer service, increase agent productivity, and benefit businesses that implement them.

Letting Customers Choose their Channel

Benefits to Business: Saving and making money are the goals of any business. Offering chat and email options to customers can help reduce voice traffic, lower contact center costs, boost agent productivity, and increase sales.

It is commonly accepted that it costs between \$3.00 and \$10.00 per call to serve a customer by phone while each email interaction costs between \$1.00 and \$3.00. And, thanks to automated, suggested, and scripted replies, less highly skilled (and therefore less highly compensated) agents can manage email effectively. Based on cost per transaction, and the idea that a single agent can handle multiple web chat sessions and respond to several emails in the time it would take for that same agent to handle a single voice call, email and web chat can reduce costs by up to two thirds.

In addition, the reduced call volume these applications engender can lower 800-number costs and queueing email to agents during lulls in voice traffic can raise productivity.

Using a multichannel contact center platform also enables companies to dynamically switch agents from one channel to another, as needed. One Avaya customer told me that, when voice volumes spike, she meets her service levels and uses agent skills more effectively by removing agents from the email queue and adding them to the voice queue.

Maximizing sales, even more important to many businesses than reducing costs, brings web chat and assisted browsing front and center because these applications help speed customers through the virtual checkout line. According to an analysis of 14 recent studies by Baymard Institute, abandonment rates of shopping carts in the online retail space hover around 65 percent. Keeping customers engaged and interested and providing information they need to make a purchasing decision can help increase sales and reinforce customer loyalty.

Benefits for agents and contact center managers: In addition to optimizing agent utilization and occupancy, allowing agents to switch from one channel to another can reduce agent fatigue and increase retention. A contact center manager at a subscription fulfillment outsourcer told me that she increased agent occupancy from 80% to 93% by moving agents from one channel to another based on volume.

With a unified customer contact system, contact center managers have a single reporting structure across all channels and, therefore, more accurate data on which to base decisions. In fact, the manager of a large publishing company told me that, because she gets accurate statistics for all contact types, she can



answer operational questions across all channels by looking at a single data display, has improved visibility into individual contacts, and can prioritize contacts better.

Benefits for customers: Customers can choose their preferred communication channel and can switch between channels as desired.

Giving customers non-real time ways to get problems addressed, such as sending an email rather than calling the contact center and waiting on hold, enables them to use the channel that makes most sense to them based on their current situation.

One company to which I spoke chose their multichannel solution after asking themselves what their customers would want – after looking at customer service through the eyes of their customers. Hugs were in order, they told me! If a customer wanted a web chat hug that’s what they would give that customer because, as far as this company is concerned, the name of the game is making customers happy.

Combining the visual richness of the web with the personalized treatment of a contact center enhances the customer experience by giving customers assistance when they need or want it. If, for example, a customer has no problem with completing a purchase by filling in an online form but is uneasy about entering credit card information into that form, the customer can click to chat and give credit card information directly to the agent.

Why Now?

Multichannel contact centers have been around since the 1990s. So, why talk about them now? There are several reasons.

When a competitor’s website is a simple click or swipe away, the difference between a current customer and a former one can depend on the level of customer care provided. And, whether a customer is a millennial, Gen Y, or baby boomer – their needs, demands, and expectations have changed, in part, due to the ubiquity of mobile devices and the increased popularity of texting and SMS.

Also, global economic issues have caused companies to re-evaluate operations and costs in search of where and how to save money and generate more revenue. By continually reassessing contact center activities, your company can meet customer needs without adding costs.

Considerations

When evaluating the move to a multichannel contact center, both technical and staffing issues must be considered.

From a technological stand point, most companies will need to expand their contact center functionality to effectively handle multiple channels and to integrate queuing, routing, reporting, and other essential contact center capabilities. Improving the overall effectiveness of the contact center and the customer experience requires that all channels be managed consistently.

From a staffing stand point, companies must train staff (who are accustomed to communicating with customers over the phone) to use new media types - and to use them effectively. For example, agents who handle email and chat sessions must be able to create messages that are grammatically sound and contain no typographical errors.

Many companies opt to train a subset of their customer service staff to handle non-voice channels, identifying which agents are most suitable for which channels and whether or not to use dedicated or blended agents. Careful evaluation and selection of agents for various channels is essential - someone who can provide excellent email responses may not have appropriate telephone manners, and those who are great on the phone may not have the appropriate writing skills for email and web chat.

And, don't sacrifice service for efficiency. When channels, such as web chat, are viewed solely as a way to reduce costs, and when improving customer service never enters into the discussion, adding a channel can backfire; voice customers, for example, might be left on hold while agents chat with other customers. An Avaya customer told me that she looks at web chat as a way to enhance customer retention and loyalty, and secondarily as a way to reduce costs. She has the right idea.

Conclusion

To be truly customer focused, companies need to think strategically about customer service and care. As businesses struggle to differentiate themselves and their products, customer service becomes a critical enabler of success. Providing the kind of customer service that today's fast paced, mobile society expects requires that businesses adapt to ever changing market opportunities and customer demands.

By deploying a multichannel contact center platform, providing a single queuing and routing engine for all channels, a single integrated view of the customer, and a single reporting system, businesses can enhance customer service and support, and reduce costs.

Your customers are asking for service on their terms so, if you're not already providing multichannel support, it's times to make the move.

About the author:

Blair Pleasant is President & Principal Analyst of COMMFusion LLC and a co-founder of UCStrategies. As a communications industry analyst, she provides strategic consulting services and market analysis on business communication applications, technologies, and markets aimed at helping end-user and vendor clients both strategically and tactically. Her primary areas of focus are Unified Communications and Collaboration, contact center, communication-enabled business processes, social media, and unified messaging. Blair provides clients with a variety of services, including surveys and research, white papers, product assessment, strategic development, vendor analysis, and more. Avaya commissioned Ms. Pleasant to share her insights.

About Avaya

Avaya is a global provider of business collaboration and communications solutions, providing unified communications, contact centers, networking and related services to companies of all sizes around the world. For more information please visit www.avaya.com.