"Stop Exceeding Customer Expectations"

How Companies Can Achieve the Holy Grail of Effortless Customer Service

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White Paper - "Stop Exceeding Customer Expectations"

Although it sounds counter-intuitive, all businesses should be careful not to exceed customer expectations. The temptation to do so is often misguided. Research published by Harvard indicates that exceeding customer expectations results in virtually no loyalty gains. Instead, arguably the best indication of increased spending and loyalty is the effort that the customer needs to put into the relationship.

In broad terms, the less effort customers have to put in the more loyal they are. Therefore organisations need to focus on mitigating disloyalty by reducing customer effort but they need to bear in mind, customers don't want over the top 'exceptional' service, they just want consistently good service!

Making this focus on service even more important, today's customers are more sophisticated than ever and they have at their disposal a much greater range of tools with which to make contact with the vendor or service provider. At the same time, their expectations are growing and their patience is reducing. They want to communicate wherever they are in the world and they expect their contact to be effortlessly successful, first time, every time.

At the same time, they are just one click away from sharing good or bad customer service with the world. If they feel the motivation, they are likely to start interacting through the Internet, through content aggregators, comparison and peer-to-peer sites - a raft of ways to share information on corporates that did not exist as recently as a decade ago. They will often cut companies loose because of poor customer service. And compounding the problem, they are likely to tweet about it or share details of the problem on social networks like Facebook or Twitter.

For all these reasons, it is more important than ever that businesses get customer service right. Traditionally, larger enterprises in particular have handled this requirement through their contact centres which for the past twenty years or so have been the central point in an enterprise from where all customer contacts are managed.

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Fast-Changing Model

The traditional contact centre needs to be continuously evolving to keep pace with the demands of today's ever more sophisticated consumers for effortless customer interaction.

At the start of any engagement process, most customers are selfish in their approach and unique in their needs. They want to get their problem resolved on their terms at a time that is convenient to them on the device of their choice.

The exact solution chosen by the provider will differ widely depending on the customer. A young employee commuting to the office on the train might want to communicate digitally via a mobile phone on their journey to work. An older, more traditional high net worth individual would be more likely to want to use a voice connection to a personal banker or relationship manager - a trusted individual with whom they have dealt before.

Each customer will have an expectation in their mind of how any interaction is going to go. Most will share a desire for it to proceed with as little effort on their part as possible.

In line with this, Cardiff Council has focused on significantly enhancing customer experience for local citizens by establishing a sophisticated contact centre. Isabelle Bignall, the council's head of contact centre services, said:

"Before we set up the call centre, none existed. Citizens seeking a service like refuse collection would open phone directories and see 400 different numbers listed for Cardiff Council. Our main switchboard was jammed continuously. When a caller succeeded in getting through, they suffered long delays, were put through to the wrong department and in some cases were forced to repeat their story time and again."

The completion of a perception study of how and why citizens communicated with the Council led to a new vision of the services Cardiff Council provided to local residents, one that would support, "an integrated strategy for information-age government, where the people of our City could choose how they wished to contact the Council rather than the other way around."

Following the implementation of a joint solution involving Mitel and a contact centre solution from Enghouse Interactive at Cardiff Council, as.Bignall explains:

"Today, we deliver a capability which includes phone-based support, e-mail, text-messaging service, web chat, council voicemail, fax and the scanning of letters for electronic distribu¬tion by Cardiff Council agents. By linking all these communication channels together through the contact centre solution, we now have a comprehensive view of the services our citizens are requesting, as well as the channels they are using to access those services."

It is not just local government organisations that benefit from these kinds of contact centre solutions. Roger Batsel, senior vice president, Republic Bank, found that a Zeacom solution from Enghouse Interactive enabled the company to provide "a seamless experience" for its clients.

"In order to create meaningful improvements in customer experience, we determined that integrating the IVR with the call center and support areas of our Bank was essential," he said.

Not all companies, however, are successful in achieving this kind of seamless customer experience. A common example of the kind of friction, which providers need to avoid at all costs, is as follows. The customer has a problem and, looking for a quick resolution, dials up the provider's contact centre. The customer is then put on hold, transferred to an interactive voice response (IVR) system where he or she is asked for personal details, including contact information, account number and the purpose of the call. The customer is then asked to respond to further questions via the telephone key pad before getting put through to someone else within the contact centre, who ends up repeating the same questions once again.

The customer's expectation was that they would simply pick up their phone or iPad and that at the point of interaction, the process would run seamlessly, smoothly and, most importantly, quickly. Unfortunately, in this hypothetical case, it didn't – so a bad customer experience is created. Ultimately, if these issues are not tackled quickly, customers will defect and churn levels rise.

The Right Channels

In dealing with a challenge like the one outlined above, contact centres need to ensure that they have systems and solutions in place to identify customers and likely types of enquiry and triage their attempts to interact accordingly.

If a customer has a sophisticated or complex enquiry for its local tax office, for example, there is no point in them going through the standard contact centre because the contact there is unlikely to be in a position to deal with it. Instead the likelihood is that they will just act as a human switch, effectively passing on the query to someone else who may or may not be able to answer it.

So if the contact centre is able to 'triage' that upfront and analyse upfront who that customer is and what they are trying to do, it will then be in a position to remove bottlenecks within the process. This will make it well placed to route or navigate the customer to somebody who can solve their interaction or query using 'first call, one call' resolution. Once again, the overall objective is to remove points of friction within the interaction approach.

Through the provision of its systems and solutions, Enghouse Interactive is able to help many of its customers to route calls more accurately to the right contact and to reduce call waiting and resolution times.

Captain Engineer Omar Alshehhie, head of network section at CNIA, which uses the attendant console solution from Enghouse Interactive said, "operators at any of our sites can now identify callers and quickly connect them to the correct CNIA department or employee. We are also able to prioritise calls from senior staff and important clients which creates an extremely efficient and professional impression."

According to Scott Voll, voice and network operations supervisor, Williamette Educational Services District, "since we deployed the Enghouse attendant consoles there has been a dramatic improvement in the number of callers being put through to the right contacts, first time. As a result, calls are being processed faster and call-waiting time has been reduced – which is great both for our customers and our receptionists."

Streamlining the Process

In order to achieve effortless customer service processes, companies need to evaluate what a typical customer service journey is likely to look like and then map these journeys to the profiles they hold on each of these customers.

In our experience, there are typically fewer than ten basic objectives each customer is trying to achieve by contacting a vendor or service provider, depending on the complexity of the solution the provider is offering. Indeed, in some cases, it is fewer than five. If a customer is phoning a utility company for example, they will typically be phoning either to tell them they are moving house, or to pay their bill, or to disagree with the bill they have been given.

In answering such enquiries, companies need to understand the profile of each customer they are dealing with and the type of problem that they are likely to have. They can then look to create an effortless pathway with a few steps in it as possible to make it as quick as possible for that customer to resolve whatever problem they have.

This is great for the customer because they will typically think that they have received great customer service. It is great for the business too because fewer steps typically means higher efficiency.

Unfortunately, all too often the customer service provided by organisations falls well short of this target..

The following real-life example, which encapsulates everything that effortless customer service is not, is a case in point.

"I had spent well over 3 hours on the phone with customer service/tech. support, having been repeatedly put on hold, transferred, and disconnected. I called back after yet another disconnection after being on hold for several minutes. The person who answered started to go into their script, asking me for irrelevant information. I told the person that I just needed to be connected to XYZ because I had been disconnected after being on the phone with them for over three hours. The CSR went to a very long speech about how he'd be happy to transfer me. I didn't need a speech. I just needed him to transfer me. I told him this. He repeated the speech. His scripted, inhuman "courteousness" just made me angry and hate the company."

The 80:20 Rule

Most businesses are structured around an 80:20 business model. So 80% of the customer interactions they have are passed as straight-through processes: they go straight through the business without needing to be touched by the human hand.

Once you get to the exception points, which require more in-depth interventions, the processes typically get much more difficult. It is at these key moments of truth where the organisation concerned can either shine or fail; where they can incur massive costs or a huge amount of customer churn by alienating their business users.

16-24 year olds, often referred to by the catch-all term Generation Y, are likely to want to make contact via a smartphone or mobile device. Therefore, sending them a one-time URL, which will allow them to navigate their way straight into the system and solve their problem for themselves through a self-service approach is likely to resonate well with that segment of the company's customer base and, by extension, save the organisation money. These customers in particular, really don't want to talk to a business about their problems. Many young people today, and increasingly older people too, will actively seek the answers through the web or social media rather than go through the tedium of waiting to be answered by an agent.

One time URLs and self-service methodologies are, of course, unlikely to be anywhere near as effective for high net worth individuals from the baby boomer generation, for example. This kind of customer is typically going to want to phone a personal relationship manager. They will want to speak personally to a person they can trust to solve their problems for them.

One of the key lessons for companies to learn here is that customers generally once they are comfortable with one medium of engagement do not like having to change it.

In one real-life example we heard a customer used the telephone to interact with a company. As the customer explains she was told, "you will have to go online to fix this."

The customer takes up the story "I replied "Seriously? I am talking to customer service – a real live human being and you can't do a thing for me? "Yes ma'am, you need to go online to do this." So I asked her, "What, exactly, do you do?" Silence."

Most businesses will have a broad array of different types of customers. In order to service them all well, they will need to combine an understanding of the customer, what that customer is trying to do and what's economically viable for the business in terms of how it services those different requests.

Again, the key here is to meet expectations but don't focus on exceeding them. Ultimately this comes back again to the 80:20 rule. Most people have an expectation of how service delivery is going to happen. If they go on an airline's website to book tickets for example, they expect that they will need to go through two or three screens and provide their credit card number before completing the booking. Customers will not feel the need to overly praise this kind of service. Most simply see it as normal and expect it to happen.

If customers were asked to fill in 25 web pages before they were given their credit they would probably consider that unacceptable but 3-4 would be deemed by most people as acceptable as long as the service provided was of a universally high quality.

In fact, most people favour good, consistent customer service over exceptional customer service delivered on occasion irrespective of what channel and what device they are using to access the organisation and where they are located at any given moment in time.

If companies focus instead on exceeding expectations, it makes it more likely that they won't be able to provide a consistent level of service every time because they will lack resources to deliver it. Also if they are providing consistently excellent customer service, yet their customers do not perceive value from it, they are effectively just creating a rod for their own back.

Scoping the Solution

That's why so many businesses are focused on creating effortless contact centres where customers can self-serve as much as they want to. When they do need voice interaction, they can rest assured that their call will go through an intelligent interactive voice response (IVR) so that the business can understand who the customer is, triage the problem to understand what they are trying to do and then apply a level of intelligence to understand the best way of resolving the problem and what the best approach is to take the business forward.

Any chosen solution will need to be flexible and successfully encompass the full gamut of customer types. So, typically, in this area at the moment, it will need to integrate a strong self-service offering and the ability to manage high net worth individuals. An attendant console type solution could have an important role to play here. Business rule and skill-based routing were key to ensure that the interaction takes place in the most efficient and the quickest way.

In short, the key here is the ability to have fabric in place that can flex around an organisation's needs the varying demands and expectations of service of all the different customer segments. In the future, the ability to virtualise the operation into a cloud or to operate a hybrid model will reduce total cost of ownership.

If you were a customer of one of the leading banks that have had a major outage to have an IT infrastructure and fabric that could expand to accommodate peaks and troughs in demand would be quite compelling. The virtualised contact centre can fulfil a need in this area, helping 'back office staff' who are not usually part of their normal contact centre offering to be 'switched on' and become part of a much bigger, more flexible contact centre. This kind of ability to flex and stretch is going to be one of the big points of differentiation for businesses. Right now, a lot of companies haven't really got this approach properly nailed down.

Ultimately too, this is yet another element in the development of the effortless contact centre which is helping businesses bring order to customer interaction chaos. With the right technology in place, businesses can classify customers and organise their material and respond to customers in the way that they want: quickly, efficiently and successfully.

Why choose Enghouse Interactive?

With over 25 years experience developing solutions that consistently exceed the expectations of our customers and partners, Enghouse has an enviable pedigree.

Enghouse Interactive develops and supplies the widest range of customer contact solutions on the market. Through our extensive network of reseller partners, we are helping thousands of organisations of all sizes, industries and complexity across the world to improve their service, productivity and operational efficiency.

Enghouse Interactive's integrated suite of solutions includes multi-channel contact centre, self-service, attendant operator consoles and workforce optimisation. This wide portfolio places us in the unique position to offer customers and partners a complete, fully featured solution from a single vendor.

Our solutions scale from a single site call reception console to multi-tenanted, multi-media contact centres with users in excess of 10,000. We have more than 1 million agent seats handling over 1 billion interactions through our systems daily – making Enghouse Interactive one of the biggest providers of customer contact solutions in the world.

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