

Five trends making news and driving change in contact centers

It's all about enhancing the customer experience by being at the center of customer interactions.



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Communications technology and solutions have entered a realm only dreamed of even 10 years ago. Millions, if not billions, of people each day are carrying on “conversations” that can influence any organization’s strategies. How effectively are you listening – and responding – through your contact center?

The pervasiveness and effectiveness of mobile, Internet and social media communications have been on display in recent years as people responded to natural disasters, political uprisings and other important events around the world. For example, on the day Barack Obama was elected president, he had accumulated more than five million supporters on 15 different social networks – support that brought young people out to the polls and contributed to Obama’s successful campaign.¹

Today’s uber-connected world is truly a different environment because

of advanced communications.

The growing power to achieve results by communicating across multiple channels – voice, video, e-mail, social media, text, fax – directly impacts businesses.

Customers increasingly demand that enterprises respond to them using their preferred communications media and channels. They want a consistent experience no matter how, why or from where they initiate an interaction. And innovations such as social media listening engines and network presence and location detectors are enabling interactions in ways previously unimaginable.

This is good news for contact centers – and the broader enterprise. Because of these and other technologies, the long-anticipated goal of transforming the contact center into a profit center is finally within reach. To achieve this goal, however, enterprises need to understand key trends driving the industry forward. In this white paper, we identify five top trends and explain how they can help organizations and their contact centers contribute more effectively to revenue growth and bottom-line profits.

¹“Obama and the Power of Social Media and Technology,” Jennifer Aaker, Stanford Graduate School of Business, Case M-321, August 27, 2009.

Trend 1. Investing more — and more wisely — in contact center personnel

Consumers are more tech-savvy than they were even five years ago. Most are adept at going online or using integrated voice response (IVR) systems to get the service they need from businesses without talking to a live agent. Although this reduces contact center call volume, it also means that customers who do request help from human attendants generally have more difficult issues to resolve and require agents who possess specialized knowledge.

To perform this higher-level work, agents require more training than if they were simply looking up account balances. Yet historically, contact center agents have been entry-level workers paid minimum wage. Largely lacking career growth paths, and rarely challenged intellectually by their duties, their employment tenures tended to be short. In 2009, the average attrition rate from North American contact centers was 9.8 percent per month.²

Traditional contact centers typically put new-hires through a several-week training program and consider them ready to face customers. But this no longer suffices to meet the more rigorous expectations of today's customers. Since agents are increasingly being asked to upsell and cross-sell to customers who call in with questions, they also need to be fully versed on company products and services. As a result, many enterprises are hiring more experienced and educated workers for the contact center, and paying them proportionally higher salaries.

One Avaya customer had an agent turnover rate of 110 percent annually, and agent onboarding required six weeks. With such a high turnover rate, the company was always going to be in catch-up mode. It became critical, from contact center supervisors up, to communicate this information and related statistics to justify the business case for added investment in education and training.

The role of contact center supervisors is changing as well. Rather than simply being treated as higher-level agents, supervisors are

being given more sophisticated management tools that help them assess agent performance, identify gaps in needed skill sets and develop training plans to address those gaps.

Not incidentally, the metrics generated by these tools are also useful for building the case for executive management that investing more in contact center personnel is smart business. Without such metrics, enterprises can be reluctant to send contact center employees to training because agent utilization rates go down when workers aren't actively answering calls. Given that the per-employee cost of attrition is \$4,285,³ however, companies are finding that it pays to invest in solutions that keep workers on the job.

Trend 2. Focusing on the quality of customer interactions, not quantitative yardsticks

Many contact centers still depend on basic metrics, such as call duration and number of calls per hour, to determine how well agents are performing. Yet many traditional operational measurements are less relevant today. When a contact center agent has been trained to

²"2009 Contact Center Recruiting and Compensation Survey," FurstPerson.

³Ibid.



Social media is the next frontier in contact centers. Here are six ways to address it:

- Build your own social media capability as soon as possible.
- Build a Twitter personality for your contact center to make it easy for customers to find your service organization.
- Staff social media channels the same as you do other customer touch points.
- Monitor social media channels 24/7.
- Don't wait for customers to contact you; build a following online.
- Integrate social media insights into your contact center operations.

help consumers fill out complex mortgage loan applications, what matters is not how quickly applications are completed, but that customer frustration and errors are minimized. Alternatively, if agents' job responsibilities include upselling or cross-selling, a long call could be a successful call because it brought in revenue.

In addition to collecting standard operational metrics, enterprises should reassess what is important to their businesses in today's context and put processes in place to measure that. For example, qualitative measures such as customer surveys might be the single most useful determinant of agent performance. Analytics solutions can cull through self-service statistics to determine how well the IVR or voice recognition system is supporting customers.

Many enterprises get useful information from automated ways to analyze text or speech. Others use tools that correlate results of outbound marketing campaigns with agent activity. As social media becomes a more common customer service channel, sifting through those interactions for relevant data is increasingly important, both

to analyze customer complaints and understand positive customer comments. By prioritizing, routing, measuring and reporting social media traffic, and linking it to customer satisfaction, revenue generation or agent performance, enterprises can achieve a unique competitive advantage.

Ultimately, the precise metrics an enterprise uses are less important than that it takes action based on what it learns.

Trend 3. Preparing for an influx of social media contacts

Social media is wonderfully compelling for companies that want to know what their customers are thinking. It can be even more powerful if companies can figure out how to incorporate this information into their product, sales and marketing plans. As an unrestricted and unstructured set of communication channels, people use social media to share their thoughts and ideas openly and freely. Social media also provides a form of collaboration that companies only dreamt about a few years ago. But now that it's here, it can be intimidating because companies often have not yet established control over how it's used and what people say.

Yet lagging behind in the adoption of social media as a customer interaction channel can present risks. For example, nearly half of major banks around the world have no strategy at all for using social media channels in their customer support functions, according to research by U.K. firm Ovum. Only 6 percent of banks that do leverage social media use it to respond to customer requests. This, Ovum researchers believe, could be a significant competitive weakness for banks.⁴

For those organizations that are already using social media, risk mitigation and damage control are currently the primary customer service uses of such channels. This is a high-value use since customers are writing about companies, like it or not. But public and private institutions should go beyond the basics of performing social media monitoring and find ways to proactively use it to their advantage. Organizations should harness social media, including Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, discussion boards, reviews and their own blogs, to broadcast their corporate thoughts, ideas, differentiators and product information, much the same way many public figures are using it to

increase their personal influence.

If an actor can use Twitter to build interest in an upcoming movie, why shouldn't public and private institutions use it as a means of enhancing their servicing image?

Of course, the institution should only make claims that it can support.

Recommendations for addressing social media include:

- Contact center leaders should not wait — they should build their own social media strategy as soon as possible. A leading practice is to seek input from young, savvy contact center agents who “live” online. The strategy should address every channel in which you want your service organization or contact center to be known, but it should at least include Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, bulletin boards and your own blog.
- Contact center leaders should set up their own Twitter account and strive to become a Twitter personality. The goal is to make it easy for the public to find your service organization.
- Staff the social media channels so that the same service-level goals established for phones, or as close to the same as possible,

can be achieved. Customers who use social media expect immediate responses. In the absence of near-instant gratification, the situation can escalate rapidly and very publicly.

- Monitor social media channels 24/7 so your organization can react quickly to developments, whether to mitigate damage from criticism or to take advantage of new business opportunities and kudos.
- Be proactive. Don't wait for customers to contact or complain about your service organization. Watch the trends and build a strong following. This will help your organization build an army of supporters who should be willing to come to your defense if your organization is “attacked.”
- Integrate the insights from social media into the contact center. If customers are interested enough to identify a service or performance issue via social media, it deserves serious and fast attention.

Within five years, social media is likely to be a primary customer interaction channel for many servicing environments. There is no point in waiting.

⁴“Lack of social skills leaving banks ‘vulnerable’—report,” Cath Everett, Social CRM, 2/21/2011, <http://www.mycustomer.com/topic/social-crm/lack-social-skills-leaving-banks-vulnerable-report/120406>.

Trend 4. Embracing customer and employee mobility

Mobile devices and applications are not only changing the way customers interact with businesses, they are transforming contact center management as well.

Customers with smartphones and tablets want to be able to contact companies from anywhere and communicate with them across multiple channels. Businesses are accommodating this desire by creating apps that allow their customers to click on an icon and engage in any number of cross-channel interactions: from text, to video, to social media, to live chat. A software company customer of Avaya has implemented mobility apps that allow its customers to place video calls for customer support from their tablet devices or smartphones, because if they are having problems with their PCs or laptops, they won't have access to the software company's customer support center online.

For companies attempting to do more with less, mobile devices provide a way to leverage contact center supervisors' time. Rather than being tied to a physical workstation



or location, supervisors can log into a performance management system from a smartphone or other mobile device and view current customer satisfaction rates or listen to a recorded interaction between an agent and a customer.

Trend 5. Proactively outreaching across multiple channels

Contact centers occasionally need to perform “outreach” to customers — notifying them of a delayed shipment, for example, or reminding them of an appointment. Having an agent make these calls or send these e-mails can be time-consuming and expensive. Enterprises can automate delivery of personalized information across multiple channels — voice, e-mail, social media, text, fax — by inserting intelligent communications, such as notification systems, into contact center systems and integrating

them with business systems. By automating the outbound messages, enterprises better leverage higher-cost resources on more value-added activities.

One example of this is the many schools and school systems that are using notification systems to alert parents and dorm students — using the channel specified by the parents and students — about weather issues, security breaches or other situations requiring action. Another example is an insurance company that anticipates that inclement weather will create an avalanche of claims — more than its staff can address in a timely manner. The company can use its notification system to let customers know about the delay and update them until the backlog is resolved.

Proactive outreach capabilities in the contact center should be aligned closely with marketing strategy and programs, both to gain more return on the investment in the technology and to take advantage of a valuable promotional or informational channel. Likewise, within the contact center, complaints from multiple customers about the same issue can be turned into a loyalty-building opportunity if a proactive outreach solution is used to address the problem quickly and effectively. Finally, it's especially important to measure the results of these efforts over time to continually improve the use of the notification capabilities, improve customer relationships and support return on investment analysis.

Don't look back

Many businesses still look on complainers as customers who are difficult to satisfy. Yet other businesses, such as supermarkets and fast-food restaurants, have for decades understood that addressing customer complaints is a sure path to customer loyalty, increased customer retention and positive reputation.

Contact centers can play a pivotal role in this process of building long and successful relationships with customers. Leading practices include:

- Always being open to discussing problems with customers.
- Listening carefully and giving due consideration to the reasons behind the dissatisfaction.
- Being personable and caring — it's important not to brush customers aside with automatic and self-serving responses.
- Apologize and acknowledge the customer's complaint, even if the customer is wrong.
- Provide customers and complaint handlers access to a "higher power" who can mediate when an impasse is reached but an ongoing relationship is still necessary.
- Take time to analyze and measure actions taken in your contact center and constantly look for ways to improve your contact center processes, procedures and supporting technology.

Acknowledging these trends and embracing contact center innovations can allow organizations to seize new opportunities — to grow revenue, increase customer loyalty and, ultimately, reinforce a company's brand. It's not a coincidence that achieving these objectives will also enhance the contact center's standing within the enterprise.

About the author

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