



Writing a new script

Old-style contact centres traditionally have a bad press. Yet enhancing the operations of modern multi-channel contact centres brings benefits to businesses and customers alike. Vivienne Rosch investigates

Some retailers are even learning to rethink their entire business as an integrated virtual contact centre, using all available channels of communication with customers to optimise customer experience and increase sales. "Retailing is first and foremost about communicating with your staff and with your customers," says Mike Bielinski, CEO at Vodat International. "Now that communications are over IP, real-time in a network, it makes it much easier to communicate with whomever you need to on a point-to-point basis."

In a market of Google-intelligent customers living their lives online, using converged mobile devices and exchanging information on consumer products on the socially networked web, most retailers realise that they must open up new channels of communication or get left behind. "Multi-channel is high on many retailers' agendas, but so far the solutions have simply extended to creating more channels rather than designing a seamless brand experience," says Paul Blunden, CEO at Foviance whose recent study of 25 leading UK retailers, conducted jointly with RXPerience, shows that only a handful of them are managing to integrate their sales channels effectively. Foremost among these are John Lewis, Amazon and Argos.

UK companies will miss out if they don't adopt what BT, in a 2008 report entitled

The Multi-channel Swap Shop, calls a "channel agnostic approach". The report quotes some amazing figures from McKinsey showing multi-channel customer spend is on average 20-30 per cent higher than that of single channel customers, and others from IBM suggesting that two-channel customers spend 114 per cent more than single channel shoppers, with those using three channels spending another 48 per cent more than those using just two.

Breaking down barriers

As well as opening up outwards, retailers need to break down the barriers between silos within. Now that different locations can be networked, it no longer matters where staff sit to answer calls. What matters is that they are available and have the relevant expertise. Thomson, part of European travel company TUI, won the CCF European Call Centre Award for Best Virtual Contact Centre this year. Building on several years of experience with Genesys and Cable & Wireless, their IT team designed an infrastructure integrating contact centre and home working teams with staff in over 350 shops. Cable & Wireless' head of contact centres, Alex Holt, comments: "What they were able to do was drive the capability of a contact centre into the High Street." This new approach sees existing contact centre, stores, home workers, warehouses and head office as just so many complimentary aspects of one virtual business.

However, what if no-one is available to answer your call? In a Europe-wide survey of 1,500 consumers and 250 contact

centres managers, carried out in March, Oracle found 77 per cent of consumers still put having to endure long call queues at the top of their list of complaints. Perception here differs from reality, at least in the UK. Contact *Babel's UK Contact Centre Operational Review for 2007* shows the real average speed to answer is 20-40 seconds, while public perception puts it 11 ½ minutes.

Many organisations now use automation to screen all calls initially and complete routine ones. A call is automatically answered and the customer's identity and other key information captured using IVR with a combination of recorded prompts, touch tone technology, text-to-speech and perhaps voice recognition. "You can use IVR or you can use voice recognition to direct a call to an individual anywhere within the organisation who can give the answer almost instantly," says Vodat International's Bielinski.

Automation can also handle routine calls out to customers, freeing up contact centre staff to take calls where an agent is needed. By automating the majority of Indesit's calls confirming delivery times, VoiceSage helped the company reduce their customer "no-show" rate on deliveries from just over three per cent to 0.7 per cent, a considerable cost saving. "Ninety six per cent of the appointment confirmation process previously done by telephone agents is automated. Four per cent is still dealt with by agents, because managing exceptions is critical to give exceptional customer service," says VoiceSage's sales director, Mark Oppermann. Clearly, this is an example where both customer and business benefit. Calls are answered more quickly and staff time is saved.

Untapped goldmine

Some think the greatest gains of all, to retailers and customers, come from exploiting currently underused sources of customer information. Craig Pumfrey, director of marketing communications at NICE Systems, believes that "capturing a contact centre's interactions with its customers and deriving insights from them" is potentially the most important aspect of all current technological enhancements to contact centre operations.

Pumfrey likens the information lying dormant in thousands of interactions, which are routinely recorded, to an untapped "goldmine". NICE offers a tool to mine this information called adaptive interaction analytics (AIA). "It enables you to capture and tag specific kinds of information," says Pumfrey. "It gives you the ability to spot words, analyse talk patterns, even detect heightened levels of emotion." AIA categorises the vast quantity of data, allowing management to home in on the best and worst interactions of each contact centre agent for quality monitoring and staff training purposes.

This information can be put to additional uses. "When customers phone up, what they're doing is giving you lots of hints and buying signals," says Pumfrey. Often these are just lost. As well as discovering valuable opportunities for cross- and up-selling, Pumfrey believes customer service, legal, financial, process and technical problems can all be spotted and solved at an early stage.

Retailers need not shy away from the brave new world of integrated multi-channel communication. Flexible and scalable solutions, many of them hosted and some on a pay-per-use basis, are available. The organic metaphor is not out of place: a modern contact centre is the 21st century retailer's ears, eyes and nose as well as its trained memory, enabling the business to focus its energies on delivering precisely what customers want.

beCogent on the up

beCogent posted a threefold increase in profit to almost £3 million for the 12 months to December 2007. Building on a £1 million return in 2006, the contact centre operator announced an underlying trading profit of £2.942 million for its 2007 activities. Revenue in 2007 grew by 43 per cent from £25.7 million to £36.9 million – almost 100 per cent up on the position in 2005. The company also added John Lewis Direct, House of Fraser and Fortnum & Mason to its client list during 2007.

"We have further improved flexibility and efficiency during 2007 in order to support the growth of our existing clients, whilst the addition of three blue chip retailers was positive recognition of our efforts to further develop our new business during the year. I am satisfied that we now have a good spread of activity, with no one client accounting for more than 25 per cent of our revenue," says Dermot Jenkinson, executive chairman at beCogent.



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