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Call Center Successes with New Technologies

By Karen Schwartz

Contact Center Successes: New Technologies To Advance The Call Center Mission

If you think of the contact center as a necessary evil, you're missing the boat, and quite possibly blinding yourself to ever seeing the contact center achieve its true mission.

Traditionally, of course, the contact center was just that—a way to centralize calls, reducing costs. The problem is that being stuck with this philosophy limits both the contact center potential and your investment ROI. Like the technology that powers the contact center, the thinking behind the contact center must evolve. For one thing, social media of all types is forcing significant changes—changes driven by customers and facilitated by the contact center. Getting with the program is a matter of survival.

But it goes beyond that. Think of the contact center not as an expense you have to bear to do business, but as a profit center. But do it smartly; instead of charging back sales related calls to the sales cost center, marketing-related calls to the marketing cost center, and the like, think more broadly.

Think of it as **Contact Center 2.0**. Your first mission, of course, is to deal with whatever issue is concerning the customer, whether it's a sale, a complaint, a problem or a return. Here's the key: Once you have done that, you've got a satisfied customer who is probably more amenable to a soft sale.

That means you have to maximize the time you have with your customers while communicating with them. But how do you do that? How do you know what to offer the customer and when they are ready to listen?

That's where *smart agent desktops* come in. These add-on contact center systems, from companies you have probably never heard of (like eglue, Cincom, Jacada and SmartPoint) aim to bring intelligence into the give-and-take between the call center agent and the customer in order to maximize the mutual experience, both in terms of profits and customer satisfaction. They collect customer data and follow business process rules set by the company for using that data.

Smart agent desktops have been around for a few years, but over the past 18 months or so, they have gotten much smarter, according to Richard Snow, a vice president and research director at Ventana Research. In the past year or so, the most innovative smart agent desktops have incorporated something called "Next best action prompts"—something that can have extremely positive implications if implemented and used correctly. Basically, the technology collects all information about a customer, including the actions taken during every interaction, including current interactions, by both the caller and the agent. Based on that information, it will suggest to the agent in real time exactly what should be pitched to the customer, or suggest a question to ask the customer. Smart agent applications become even smarter when integrated with *customer relationship management (CRM) software systems* and customer analytics programs.

Here's another idea: incorporating *natural language search engines* to enhance the customer experience. These technologies, from companies like InQuira, Exalead and Numero, capture customers' questions from all contact center channels, synthesize the data, analyze it, apply business rules, create queries for each content source that will be searched, and then find answers from those content sources.

And a third: *speech analytics*. This technology, from companies like Nexidia, Envision, NICE Systems and Utopy, is growing by leaps and bounds. It aggregates the unstructured data that comprises the customer's voice calls. It then analyzes that data to determine where the contact center can improve the customer experience and the way calls are handled.

Cool stuff. So why aren't more contact centers using these software technologies? Much of it has to do with awareness. I'm not faulting just contact centers here; the vendors are not doing a great job of promoting the technology either. Better promotion by the software suppliers, particularly in the form of real-world case studies and ROI business cases, would go a long way in advancing call center software technologies.

The other reason is cost, but that's shortsighted. Competition is fierce, and technologies like these bring contact centers squarely into the present. Cost is only a barrier until payback and ROI are justifiably calculated.

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