



Contact Centre Action

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Is Your Call Centre Ready to Become a Contact Centre?

Call centres were set up to provide an additional channel for customers to do business with companies. A channel that, in many cases, had longer operating hours than the traditional method of doing business face to face. A channel that customers could access from their homes, from their offices, from their cars, in fact anywhere that they had access to a telephone. This new channel also provided cost benefits to companies, as individual staff were able to process more customer contacts in any given period than they previously could face to face.

Technology advances focused on better handling of voice calls – advanced queue handling and routing, advanced reporting, self-service transactions handled by an IVR rather than by an operator, predictive/progressive/power diallers, and more recently speech recognition in some applications.

Now, the technology exists to handle other channels through your call centre (hence the move to the name “contact centre” as operators are required to handle more than just voice calls). Channels such as email, fax, web chat, web collaboration and co-browsing can all be queued, routed and reported on in exactly the same way as voice calls can.

This all sounds great. There are advantages for the customer in additional flexibility in timing (emails can be sent 24 hours 7 days a week), and the availability of additional ways of making contact with companies where, when and how it suits the customer. There are also cost advantages to the company and the ability to spread the workload (customers expect their phone call to be answered immediately, but most are happy to wait 24 hours for an email response).

So every company that has a call centre should be investing in technology and becoming a contact centre, right?

Wrong!

While there may be some distinct advantages in some cases, there are also other considerations, all of which should be considered before deciding to move to a contact centre.

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What does your customer want?

There is no point in investing in contact centre technology if it is inappropriate for your centre or your customers don't want it. For example, there is little point in providing customers the ability to contact an emergency services help line by email! In contrast, small businesses may appreciate the ability to place orders via email in the evening, after they close for the day.

First and foremost, look at your business. What services are provided today, and will be provided in the future? Can any of these services be handled better by an alternate contact channel? If you believe the answer to this is 'yes', will your customers use these channels? The only way to answer this question is to ask your customer. Don't assume you know what your customer wants, it might be an expensive mistake – actually ask your customers what methods of contact they would prefer to use.

What operator skills are required?

This is one of the most overlooked aspects in the decision to become a contact centre. It is often assumed that if an operator is good on the phone, they will adapt to email, chat, collaboration and other contact channels easily. The truth is, the skills required are quite different, and while it is possible that an operator can excel at multiple contact channels, it shouldn't be assumed that this will be true in all cases. For example, skills such as call control, being able to communicate without visual contact and clarity of speech are important for operators taking voice calls. Conversely, these skills are not required for handling emails, faxes web chat and collaboration, however skills such as spelling, grammar, punctuation and typing speed become important.

Skilled operators can often handle a voice enquiry and respond to an email enquiry *at the same time*, but it is worth analysing your operators' skills before heading down this path. With many contact centre software packages you can set up each contact channel as a skill, and assign the skills with proficiency levels to each operator. For example, you might assign a 'voice skill' to all your current operators with a proficiency level of 5, and an 'email skill' with a proficiency level of 0. Through analysis and training, you may determine that 10% of your operators have the skills required to respond to email requests, so you move these operators up to a proficiency level of 2. As they gain further experience, you can increase their proficiency level further.

Hours of operation.

Because the internet is a 24 hour 7 day medium, customers expect to be able to send emails, access your web site, complete online forms and send faxes 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Fortunately, with most contact centre software these days, you can set up an automatic reply for faxes/emails that can say something like 'Thank you for fax/email which has been successfully received. Our specialist customer service staff will answer your query within xx hours'. It is important to set a realistic expectation of when your customer will receive an answer to their question, and this will depend on a number of factors. The most important factor will be how long your customers consider is an acceptable time to wait. Again this can only be determined by asking your customers. If your customers expect a response in six hours, it is no good responding in 48 hours, as your customers will go elsewhere. Conversely, if a 24 hour response is acceptable to your customer,

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it is wasting money and resources if you have sufficient staff available to provide a 2 hour response time. Again, this time will depend on the nature of your business and your customers' expectations.

Response times.

Customers who phone a call centre have an expectation of immediacy. They expect their call to be answered *now* and they expect their question to be answered or their problem to be solved *now*. To fulfil this expectation each and every time can be quite expensive. Most call centres set service levels that are a compromise between the customer's wishes and the cost of having enough resources to satisfy this desire. Often, the amount of delay a customer will tolerate before abandoning is taken into consideration as well.

Web chat is similar in expectation to phone, it is just a different communication medium. Customers still expect someone to be there to answer their query immediately. Given that the internet is a 24 hour 7 day medium, this can actually compound problems. In some customer's minds, if the internet is there, then someone will be there to answer their question. The internet also removes the concept of geographical boundaries or time zones. Customers may want to contact you from anywhere in the world, at any time of the day.

On the other hand, email does reduce the need to respond immediately. Most customers still view email as a form of mail, requiring delivery time, reading time, possibly research or investigation time, time to compose a response and time to deliver the response back to the originator. Customers are more prepared to wait for a response, whether it be 2 hours, 24 hours or a week – it depends on the type of query. Contact centre managers need to ensure that the query types are suitable for email – obviously anything urgent is not suitable. It is also wise to immediately auto-reply to every email using automated software, and set the expectation as to when the full reply will be sent. This allows agents to respond to emails during quiet periods, thereby requiring less staff and reducing cost.

Cost.

Relative to other methods of contact, there are savings available through the implementation of a contact centre, even when the cost of a multi-media software application are considered.

There is no requirement for a toll free phone number, or a large number of telephone lines for email, chat or co-browsing, so telephone infrastructure can be scaled down. Even the total cost of ownership of one handset, including purchase, depreciation and maintenance can amount to thousands of dollars over its life.

A well-designed web page that facilitates self-service may significantly reduce the need for contact at all.

Web chat may take longer than a phone call, but it is possible for a skilled operator to be handling multiple conversations at one time, thereby increasing efficiency.

On many web sites nowadays there are self-service forms – forms to request information, forms to apply for loans or insurance etc. If a customer has

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difficulty in completing a form, they usually have two alternatives – phone a call centre and have an agent talk them through the completion of the form, or go to the business ‘shop front’ and complete the form face to face. The second alternative is the most expensive and least convenient, and should be avoided if possible. The first alternative can become a lengthy phone call if there is any misunderstanding by either party about which form is being completed, or where in the form the problem lies. Through the use of co-browsing, both parties can see the form at the same time and the agent can quickly and easily advise the customer on the best way to complete the form.

As previously discussed, email and fax provide the greatest cost saving. Because neither channel requires urgent responses, the workload generated in busy periods can be spread over quieter times. The means you don’t need to staff for peaks, staff that are on the phones can answer emails and faxes during quiet periods, and you can roster more staff during periods when staff costs are lower, i.e. reduce the need to pay penalty rates for after-hours work.

Software packages & reporting

Most current generation call centre CTI software packages have multimedia options, however all are slightly different in their level of sophistication and the facilities they offer.

As a starting point, the software should be able to queue and report on emails and chat sessions as if they were phone calls. All the standard statistics such as arrival times, average speed to respond, which agent handled them etc. should be available.

The addition of a fax gateway to the PABX will transform faxes into emails and allow them to be handled as if they were emails.

Some software packages allow web co-browsing (the ability for both parties to see the same web page at the same time and see any updates the other party makes), and the ability to ‘push’ a web page to a customer.

Another common add-on feature is the ability for the software to ‘read’ an email looking for key words and phrases, and providing the agent with a suggested response to the query, usually from a library of pre-formatted responses. Therefore, the agent only needs to check the reply is appropriate, insert any customisation that is required and send the response. This reduces the time and effort required to create a response and ensures consistency of responses between agents.

Summary.

In most cases there are sound reasons to move from a call centre to a contact centre, based on cost and customer service. Alternate communication channels can even provide some redundancy when it comes to Business Continuity Planning.

However, it is not simply a matter of purchasing a suitable software application, configuring it, turning it on and expecting to realise significant gains.

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Before moving from a call centre to a contact centre, consider whether your call centre is suited to alternate contact channels, and whether your customers want (and will use) the alternate channels. When calculating your return on investment, don't forget to include costs to train your agents, as contact centre skills are different to call centre skills.

During the implementation, ensure that the process and procedural changes that *will* be required, are analysed and implemented alongside the technical changes. Also, it will be necessary to undertake some customer communication and education. It is often better to employ an external consultant to handle these components of the implementation. This allows the technical team to focus on the application implementation, and the call centre staff to focus on the day-to-day running of the call centre. At the very least this will reduce the risk and smooth the overall implementation.

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