Delivering a Digital Customer Experience for Today's Mobile Consumer

Making digital customer communications a reality

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Powering connections

A white paper from Mitel

Executive summary

Customer experience is a key differentiator in today's ultra-competitive environment. More than ever, that experience is shaped and delivered through digital interactions. While the majority of customer communications are still voice-based, consumers now rely more heavily on digital methods, such as email, SMS, web chat, and social media. They expect the flexibility to interact through the medium of their choice, wherever they are. And, they expect to be able to switch between one medium and another while they are on the move.

The latest market research puts this reality in perspective. Ovum reports that 74 per cent of consumers today use three or more channels when seeking customer care.[1] Forrester states use of web self-service options increased to 76 per cent in 2014, while 58 per cent of consumers opted for online chat options, 38 per cent used SMS messaging, and 37 per cent opted for Twitter interactions.[2]

At the same time, consumers are now empowered by social media. One quarter of the world's population has active social accounts.[3] These consumers are comfortable posting their opinions and observations about their experiences on social media web sites and forums. In this environment, a negative customer service story can go viral with the click of a mouse.

What does this mean for an organization's relationship with its customers?

Research shows that 82 per cent of consumers say the number one factor that leads to a great customer service experience is having their issues resolved quickly.[4] SDL reports that 64 per cent of consumers will defect to a competitor after a major customer experience failure and brands lose an average of 65 per cent of the revenue they would have earned from a customer for every negative customer experience.[5] So, if a business can't provide the convenient, intimate experience customers are looking for, chances are a competitor will. Therefore, delivering a satisfying customer experience is — or should be — a top priority for every business today. Unfortunately, creating and managing that experience has never been more complex. What's more, economic downturns and an evolving marketplace have made it increasingly crucial for businesses to reduce costs and increase operational efficiency — all while remaining compliant with industry regulations and policies.

With the digital customer experience shifting from a "nice to have" offering to an essential service, any business that interacts with its customers must have the right technology to deliver a consistent experience across all media, as well as a concrete strategy for this broadened scope of service. This white paper provides an overview of the digital expectations and habits of today's digital consumer, and offers practical next steps for transforming customer experience from dated to digital.

Until recently, voice was the fastest, most convenient method of interacting with a business, compared to traditional mail or visiting in person. This is no longer the case. Despite the prevalence of mobile phones in today's society, consumers are using voice less and less to engage with businesses (and even each other) as they embrace the wealth of alternatives at their fingertips. In fact, a 2014 Nielsen study revealed that voice calling represented a meager three per cent of smartphone usage in the US and that the majority of usage was related to text messaging, social media, and other apps.[6]

The new mobile consumer

The impact of this shift in usage patterns on business is clear. Just as voice calls eliminated the wait time associated with sending a letter and the inconvenience associated with physically visiting a business, digital communications options have reduced wait times and eliminated the need for a live voice connection with a customer service center. Web chat and SMS offer alternatives to fit any situation. They eliminate wait times and offer instant gratification that an issue is being addressed. And, they allow consumers to multitask while awaiting a response.

Meanwhile, the evolution of Web 2.0 has created a shift toward user-generated content and social media platforms for 24/7 communications, whether for corresponding directly with one another or broadcasting messages, pictures, and video to the world. These social outlets give consumers a new voice and an undeniable power as word-of-mouth marketers. And in the online world, hell hath no fury like a customer scorned. The social networking soapbox extends the reach of customer complaints exponentially. Luckily, the same applies to compliments.

Today's consumers are no longer content to work within a company's set business hours. They expect the freedom to choose how they interact from a variety of communications channels.

In this always on, always connected, continuously broadcasting world, the expectations of consumers have changed. Today's consumers are no longer content to work within a company's set business hours. They expect to connect at any time of day or night. They expect the freedom to choose how they interact from a variety of communications channels. And, they expect to receive instant answers to their queries through seamless digital interactions. As noted by Gartner, failure to respond to social channels will lead to a 15 per cent increase in churn rate for existing customers.

Transitioning from dated to digital

Communicating with customers through channels other than voice calls or in-person meetings is not an entirely new concept. Unfortunately, many businesses that have embraced additional communications vehicles to complement their standard telephony offerings still have some way to go to achieve efficiency and full-scale integration. In most businesses, communications silos have emerged as a result of the addition of digital capabilities (such as email, SMS, social media, and chat) that enhance interactions with customers. These silos are rarely under the control of the same business function.

For example, the marketing department may own the social media feeds and corporate identities that customers inevitably wind up expecting to engage with. And, the engineering team may own the technical support portal that addresses product issues. Each silo performs to a different set of standards and is enabled by independent processes and infrastructures that waste resources through unnecessary duplication. Typically, each silo also fails to make full use of the knowledge base within the organization and its performance is not measured and recorded.

To truly deliver an optimal customer experience, independent communications silos must be transitioned to an integrated digital framework that funnels all interactions to one central location.

To truly deliver an optimal customer experience in today's digital environment, businesses must transition independent communications silos to an integrated digital framework, either funnelling all interactions to one central location or facilitating easy collaboration between customer touchpoints and subject matter experts. With this framework, employees can assess and respond to customer queries in an appropriate, efficient, and consistent manner. Plus, each interaction can be stored for compliance purposes.

Enhancing self-service options

The inefficiencies of communications silos are also evident in self-service options The myth that self-service is an inferior alternative to providing a constructive and personalized customer experience has been eliminated by many market innovations. The most visible example is offered by the banking sector.

Although consumers love self-service when it works for them, they really hate it when it doesn't. This is especially true for phone interactions.

For years, the only way to make deposits and withdrawals at a bank was to visit the bank and stand in line. Today, banks offer consumers 24/7 access to bank accounts from millions of automated teller machines (ATMs), through online banking, and smartphone-based apps. Consumers like the convenience these options offer. They don't complain about how much more impersonal the experience is compared to standing in line to see a teller during business hours. They recognize that these alternatives offer a good self-service option that provides an opportunity to get things done quicker. As a result, they are more likely to be more loyal to the bank that offers the most convenient self-service alternatives. Consumers get the experience they expect and the bank gets an enhanced reputation, as well as a dramatic drop in operating costs.

But, although consumers love self-service when it works for them, they really hate it when it doesn't. This is especially true for phone interactions. In many cases, consumers calling into most businesses run the risk of encountering the kind of "Dial 1 for Sales" sprawling menu hell that gives automated self-service — and consequently the business providing it — a bad name. As a result, many consumers now have very low expectations for these self-service options. This gives businesses an opportunity to create a truly memorable customer experience by enhancing self-service offerings.

Creating digital synchronicity across the business

To move customer interactions beyond current limitations and optimize the customer experience, businesses must create digital synchronicity across the entire organization. This can only be achieved with a single, coherent digital customer experience strategy that enables multichannel interactions using a variety of mediums. And, that strategy must also measure performance to improve future connections.

With an effective strategy, customers, employees, and the business as a whole can expect a variety of benefits:

Customers

- Customers are empowered with flexible communications options to use as they see fit
- Customer patience is preserved through intelligent, integrated, automated self-service options available 24/7
- The needs of VIP customers are satisfied through skills-based or preferred agent routing
- Customers are served through informed interactions that fully exploit all institutional knowledge to address challenging queries rapidly

Employees

- Employees get immediate and long-term gains in efficiency from breaking down silos, eliminating duplication of effort, and improving productivity
- Employees get more job satisfaction and are less likely to churn from unlocking collective knowledge
- Agents work faster with process-aligned communications tools that allow them to work from home or remotely as if they were in a central office

Business as a whole

- Leverage digital customer habits and the appetite for new communications channels, while benefiting from significantly reduced cost per interaction
- Improve economies of scale as agents multitask and deal with multiple communications at once
- Enjoy increased competitive advantage through the delivery of excellent service levels
- Stay ahead of the curve on future customer communications preferences, such as continually advancing mobile apps
- Get a return on investment with a real-time dashboard of comprehensive, accurate customer experience metrics and key performance indicators
- Achieve data compliance on a cost-effective, predictable, and measurable basis, consistent across all communications channels
- Embrace change with a flexible and future-proof customer engagement platform that is ready to address the evolution of customer preferences

Ultimately, all these benefits will have an impact on both revenues and costs.

From a revenue perspective, an effective strategy will create more satisfied customers, which will lead to repeat business, positive referrals, and increased loyalty. It will also enable a greater conversion of prospective leads into new customers. In fact, Harvard Business Review reports that top performers in customer experience achieve more than double the revenue of laggards.

On the cost side, a digital customer experience will generate significantly greater efficiencies than maintaining a siloed approach. Employees will be provided with the proper tools to respond to all queries in a consistent and professional manner, irrespective of the medium the customer is using. They will have the ability to escalate queries to internal experts and allow supervisors to review responses before being sent. This will enhance productivity, improve staff retention, and eliminate duplicated effort.

Turning theory into practice

This approach has been applied successfully by many businesses. For example, Red Funnel Ferries in the UK recently transitioned to a multichannel contact center to improve its customer service operations. The company operates 30,000 sailings annually between the UK mainland and the Isle of Wight. When its legacy voice system reached its end of life, Red Funnel Ferries opted for a new contact center system that enables it to interact with customers via multiple channels, including social media.

Red Funnel's contact center handles inbound customer service, support, and sales via voice, email, and social media interactions. To date:

- *Customer complaints decreased by 16%*
- *Customer compliments increased by 116%*

Click here to see the Red Funnel team describe their success in their own words.

Red Funnel's contact center now handles inbound customer service, support, and sales across a wide range of interactions that include enquiries, bookings, holiday packages, and more.

Going beyond voice-only interactions, the contact center also routes and queues email enquiries as well as social media interactions. With its new

system, Red Funnel delivers proactive social customer service via Twitter on the company's @redfunnel and @rf_travel news feeds. To "promote a customer-orientated support system," contact center agents handle all interactions — regardless of channel — and are fully trained and able to handle a wide spectrum of enquiries, including phone calls, email, and social media. This makes the agents more productive and ensures customers get the interactions they need via the medium most comfortable for them.

For example, many Red Funnel customers have taken to social media channels such as Twitter and Facebook to post questions and comments about the ferry service. Red Funnel agents now actively monitor the social media streams and respond to customers using these channels.

Chris Elliott, Red Funnel's Contact Center Manager, notes that: "We used to get inundated with enquiries when we experienced delays and cancellations due to weather conditions. Our contact center has up-to-date information on all of our vessels and can proactively publish when there are delays or cancellations to notify our customers. A customer may post a tweet asking why the service is delayed, and get a response from the contact center team that provides information on the current service status in real time. We can be more proactive and notify customers of issues, which cuts down on the number of calls we have to handle."

Key ingredients for effective digital customer experiences

To achieve maximum competitive advantage, a digital customer experience strategy must be built on four key elements: Personalized experiences, Quick response times, Relevant information, Proactive experiences.

Personalized experiences

Potential customer enquiries can come from anywhere. Being truly digital means enabling customers to connect the way they want, when they want, and from where they want. Existing customers must be identified and any new customers must be profiled. And, all customer data across all media channels should be retained for the entire duration of the customer relationship.

Quick response times

The digital customer experience has no room for delay. Speed, accuracy, and timeliness of the initial interaction are paramount and all media must offer appropriate self-service capabilities. Bottlenecks should be eliminated. And, forecasting tools should be used to help managers optimize the workforce with the most productive and efficient agent staffing levels.

Relevant information

Important customer information should be captured during all stages of an interaction and carried throughout the entire life cycle of the interaction and customer history. By constantly building and maintaining a relevant picture of the customer and all the data that surrounds him or her, employees can provide a more personal, engaging, and timely service that reduces customer churn and inspires loyalty. Integrating an organization's customer relationship management (CRM) system with its communications platform helps share customer data across business departments. This data is extremely important for spotting untapped opportunities to increase revenue per customer and to feed into macro-level data analysis that informs wider strategic business decisions, from marketing strategy to service design.

Proactive experiences

The customer experience can be improved dramatically by using customer information to anticipate events, act upon scheduled events, and plan resources more effectively. With the right information, a business can use mass messaging or individual, personalized messages over voice, email, or SMS channels to provoke a response from the customer (e.g., reaching usage limits, appointment/late fee reminders, etc.). This is preferable to reacting to unplanned customer enquiries. It lowers the potential for problems that could reduce customer loyalty. And, it improves agent morale by enabling repetitive enquiries to be satisfied proactively through self-service options.

7 Seven steps for creating a successful digital customer experience

There are seven steps you can take to transition your customer experience from dated to digital.

1. Take responsibility

Who is ultimately responsible for customer engagements: the CEO, sales director, marketing director, customer service director? If this isn't immediately clear within your organization, then your journey to a digital customer experience is already off to a bad start. Once you've determined who is responsible, they can begin defining the customer experience strategy. What should this strategy include?

Keep in mind that responsibility goes beyond the "owner" of the customer. It extends to anyone that will be affected by the customer experience strategy. Therefore, taking responsibility for the customer experience starts with hiring the right people, enabling those people to take ownership of customer experience issues, empowering staff to solve problems without escalations, finding solutions, and fixing problems quickly.

Ultimately, the goal is to understand customers, give them the experiences they want, and keep those experiences consistent across all touch points. This will create loyal customers.

2. Understand the stakeholders

Find out as much as possible about the experiences of your agents and other customer service staff. Most importantly, understand your customers' preferences:

- *What is their preferred way of communicating?*
- *What are their expectations and needs around operating hours?*
- *How willing are they to self-serve?*
- *What emerging technologies are starting to become more important to them?*

This treasure trove of information can be put to good use ensuring that optimum customer journeys are aligned to workflows.

Involve your IT team at an early stage and outline the value and purpose of your technology solution. Plan for CRM system integration and allow the team to evaluate whether any changes to underlying infrastructure are necessary. Consider the impact on:

- *Architecture: Do you have IT staff on-site to manage premise equipment or does a cloud-based deployment make more sense? Are there multiple sites? Will you need redundant, resilient, or highly available contact center servers?*
- *Contact center workers: Do agents and supervisors work only on site or do they have the option to work from home or while they're on the road?*
- *Integrations: Are there other business systems that must be integrated with the contact center, such as ERP tools? Are there other ordering, fulfilment, and support tools that can be integrated into the contact center to streamline business processes?*

Finally, give the marketing team the opportunity to influence how brand perception can be improved.

3. Automate common inquires with self-service capabilities

With modern digital customer experience tools, self-service is no longer restricted to voice interactions. Analyze frequently asked questions, simple agent transactions (whether through voice, web chat, SMS, etc.), and customer survey responses to decide which processes are the most suitable for automation. Use digital workflow routing capabilities to provide self-service to customers through email auto-acknowledgements, automated web chat responses, and even inbound and outbound SMS inquiries.

Self-service options offer a significant opportunity to improve the customer experience and reduce costs. They have a critical role to play in your digital customer experience. But, take nothing for granted. There are plenty of examples of organizations that fail to empathize sufficiently with customer frustrations around automation. These organizations then establish self-service options that don't meet customer expectations.

4. Prepare for the full scope of digital channels

Whether it's social, web chat, email, or SMS, all channels represent some level of importance to your customers. If you aren't ready to apply the full scope of options, identify which channels are most important to your business based on your target demographic and the nature of your customer relationships, and leverage a modular approach that lets you scale up and out over time, and plug in specific capabilities where applicable.

Mobile apps are the fastest growing digital channel today. Make sure you're in a position to take advantage of this channel and other trends when the time is right, without having to re-engineer your entire infrastructure.

5. Empower your agents

Deploy state-of-the-art tools that enable employees to work efficiently and flexibly:

- *Select the right phone solution for seamless integration with remote agents, CRM, chat/presence engines, and other business processes*

- *Define unified communications capabilities to ensure customer queries can be resolved first time by empowering agents to instantly locate, message or conference-in subject matter experts to obtain immediate answers*

- *Provide special service levels for VIP customers by profiling, identifying, and prioritising them through skills-based or preferred agent routing*

- *Offer call-back services and self-service options to smooth out peaks and extend availability*

- *Implement mobile solutions to allow agents and supervisors to work from anywhere at any time*

- *Use analytics and reporting to enable root-cause analysis and improve future processes*

- *Consider work force management solutions to help predict call volumes and optimize resourcing*

- *Include call recording to meet regulatory compliance and for training purposes*

6. Run a tight ship

Build a modern and reliable customer service environment that integrates traditional ACD with sophisticated voice and digital workflow processes and multiple customer contact points. Ensure business continuity with robust and highly resilient communications solutions designed to provide seamless and uninterrupted service, and no loss of reporting or real-time capabilities during hardware failure or network outages. Most importantly, wherever possible, leverage virtual networking and process options to reduce hardware and operations costs.

7. Apply effective management and reporting metrics

Maintain constant business and operational visibility over the customer experience you provide by leveraging feature-rich, real-time management and reporting tools.

Integrate management capabilities, such as quality monitoring, call recording, outbound dialing, and campaign management.

Ensure you can "join the dots" at the management and agent level by combining the power of multiple management applications. For example, potential spikes in demand can be predicted via global social media monitoring and addressed immediately through agent workforce scheduling. Similarly, reporting and call recording can provide insights on scheduling, agent metrics, and campaign performance.

Conclusion

Given the digital environment in which consumers live and work, today's businesses must be equipped to interact with customers through a variety of mediums. They must give customers the freedom to choose the communications methods that make the most sense for them whenever they need them. Typically, that choice will be governed by the nature of the enquiry, its relative importance or urgency, the time of day, the location of the individual, or by an impulsive whim. Trying to anticipate which option a customer will choose at any given moment is pointless. The real objective is to be equipped to meet customer expectations with a variety of communications channels in an increasingly competitive environment.

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