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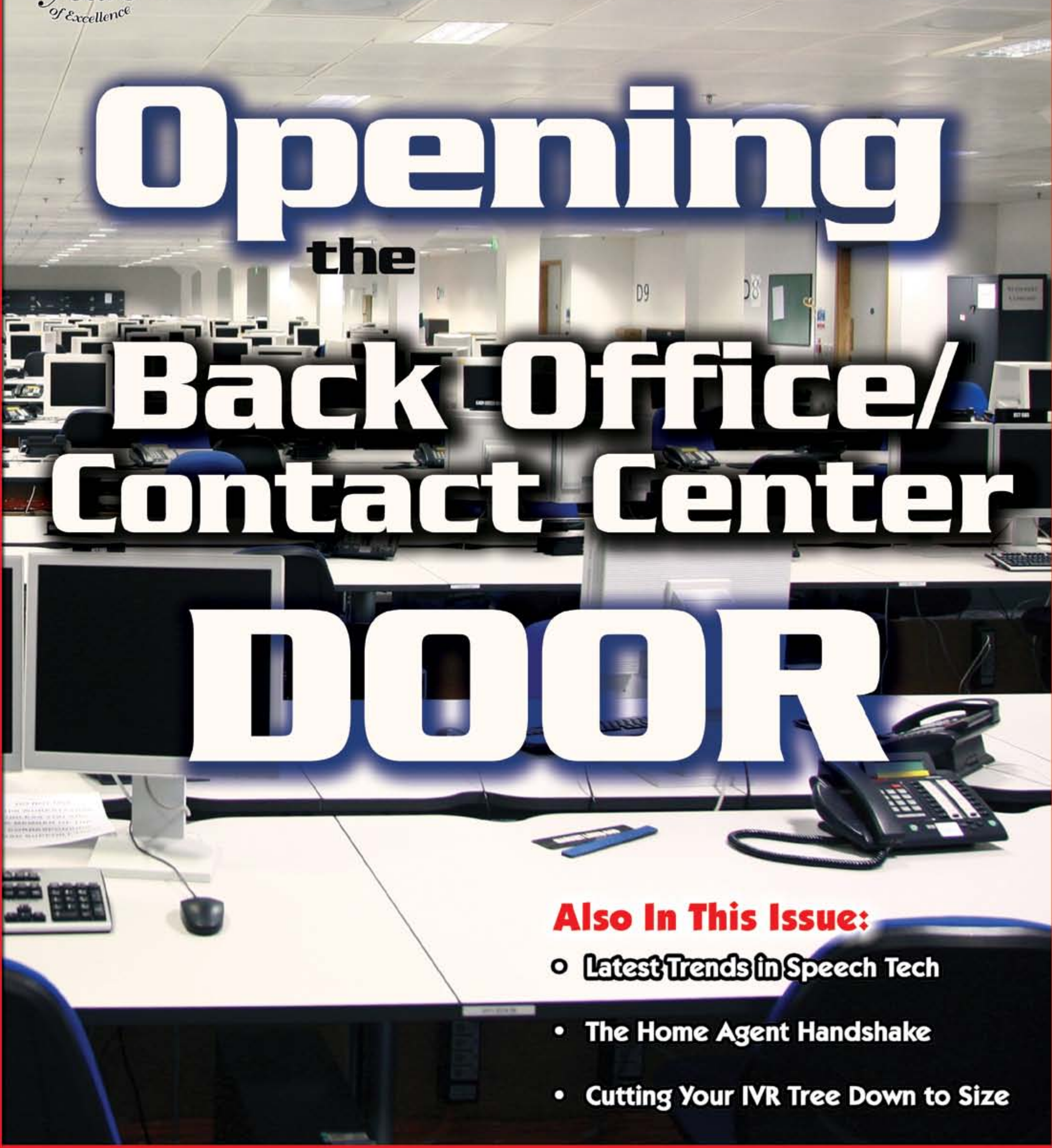

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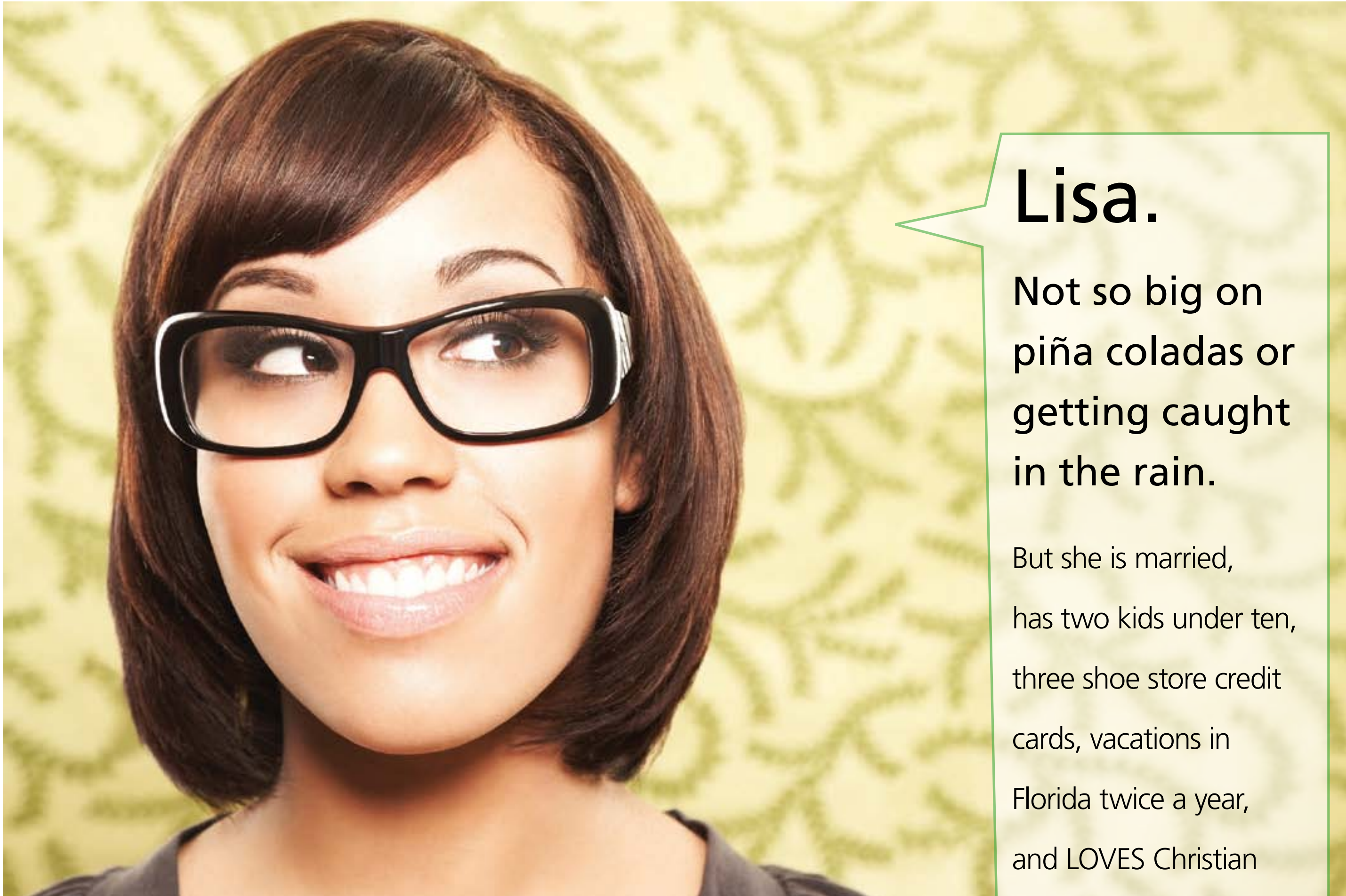
- Cutting Your IVR Tree Down to Size



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Rich Tehrani, *CEO, TMC*

Latest Trends in Speech Technology

At the recent SpeechTek 2011 conference in New York, I gained some great insight into the state of speech technology. For example, Jeff Schlueter of Nexidia told me his company's speech analytics solutions have been in greater demand in this current economy as the desire to control costs has led to increased adoption of speech analytics. In addition, the company has released version 9.0 of its Enterprise Speech Intelligence product suite which cuts the TCO in half and allowing for customers to handle even larger amounts of data.

Nuance Takes Speech Technology Literally Into the Clouds

Dena Skrbina and Andrea Mocherman from Nuance Communications explained how its technology was able to help transform the business of US Airways by providing a state-of-the-art cloud-based communications solution.

In short, the company has provided the airline with technology that is integrated with customer phone numbers, allowing callers to be immediately presented with information pertaining to their flights. On calls, customers are greeted by name and immediately provided information about parking, gates, times and upgrades. Moreover, the new system makes better use of hold time by querying for needed information, which is subsequently passed to agents.

In another upgrade over traditional IVR systems, technology is now in place allowing prosody to be determined – in other words punctuation such as question marks are "understood," allowing the automated voice to have the proper intonation making it sound more human.

Intrigued? These solutions are currently available to Nuance On-Demand customers and will be rolled out to CPE customers over the next twelve months.

Nuance did some calculations and, on the 10 percent on-hold time US Airways has saved as a result of this upgrade, it believes the airline will save $6M a year. Moreover, they believe this number will increase as they optimize the system. US Airways is so happy with the system, they have dubbed it "Wally" and even used it to read the airline's forward looking statements on the company's latest conference call.

Microsoft To Abstract Devices For More Seamless Experiences

Last year, Microsoft introduced me to its Xbox Kinect gaming system with built-in speech recognition and I was very impressed. To date, though, the gaming system has been better known for its motion detection than for its speech technology. This will potentially change soon, as speech has now been put into the SDK.

In my meeting with Grant Shirk, I also had a chance to use Windows Phone 7 Mango and, as Shirk explained, some areas of speech integration are apps, search and address book. The new Mango OS supports 500+ new features, and 4 of the top 15 requests for improvements included speech.

I asked Shirk about his thoughts regarding HTML5. He believes there is a lot of opportunity for speech to be integrated into HTML5 and that HTML5 investments generally start with customer interactions. "Speech is a natural interface," he pointed out. When queried about where Microsoft sees itself in these spaces, he replied, "We are in a great position to provide services to help companies build cross-channel experiences independent of device." To me that makes the company sort of a super-middleware provider of the future and, in some ways, Adobe's new Edge tool I just covered will be competitive with this vision.

New Player Novauris Intrigues

Competing against established players like Nuance, Microsoft and Loquendo isn't easy, but Novauris, a newcomer to the speech technology space, has already inked some deals with tier one OEMs and carriers, and has a specific niche where it believes its performance is best in class. Specifically, that expertise includes accessing very large sets of databases such as addresses, names of people, product catalogs, IPTV and electronic programming guides, local search and directory assistance. The company works with Angel and SpeechCycle in the call center space as well – doing name and address recognition in the cloud and passing back the data via XML in real time.

Please enjoy all my comments from SpeechTek on my blog on TMCnet, including thoughts on meetings with Voxeo, Wavelink, SAP, Cyara, Zoho, and more on my blog on TMCnet: http://tmcnet.com/59038.1 CIS

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Erik Linask, *Group Editorial Director, TMC*

Is it Time to Cut Down the IVR Tree?

Several times over the past few years, I've detailed in this column the good and the bad about customer service experiences – and ways the bad can be transformed into the good. One of the most common technologies for enhancing service quality, especially in a time when many customers prefer self-service alternatives to having to wait in queues for agents to solve routine problems, is IVR functionality.

IVR systems can be designed to solve any number of issues, from the most basic, like providing directions, to more complex, like troubleshooting cable set top box malfunctions. Without question, it's great to have that option but, there are times – more often than not – that an automated voice tree is going to create more frustration than satisfaction.

For one thing, when it comes to product quality, most companies proactively resolve common problems in the production cycle, hopefully eliminating calls regarding those problems altogether. In addition, when customers do find the need to call a service center, often, they are unsure which IVR option to choose, forcing them to play a guessing game, often leading to even greater frustration.

The last thing any business wants to create is more dissatisfaction. Most customers can accept the problems may arise from time to time, and will be satisfied with quick and simple resolution (thus the success of the IVR market for basic queries).

The key, however, lies in making it easy for customers to reach live agents when they desire – and to do it quickly. We all know the relationship between poor customer service experiences and churn. In an online world, where it's just as easy to shop at one retailer as it is another, businesses must be ready to interact with their customers quickly and efficiently – and that's usually via phone, or perhaps chat (I had an extremely positive chat experience with an iTunes agent when faced with a loss of content).

A recent Consumer Reports study shows that more than 7 out of 10 online shoppers express frustration when unable to reach live agents. Of those, two-thirds say they have become so disenchanted with the lack of response they hung up. This is the ultimate frustration, and certainly creates candidates for defection.

So, what's the best approach? If you look at the Internet's largest retailer, Amazon.com, the answer is, don't use IVR. However, according to STELLAService, it is the only one of the top 10 Internet retailers that doesn't.

A STELLAService survey found that the 21 retailers in the top 100 that use only live agents boast an AWT (average wait time) less than half the other 79 businesses, at under one minute. According to the study, Sierra Trading Post ranks best, with an AWT of an incredible six seconds. Furthermore, of the top 10 online retailers, ranked by AWT, only one leverages an IVR system.

This creates something of a conundrum for businesses seeking to understand how to most effectively provide quality care. Clearly there are a number of factors involved, including the nature of the business, which has a direct correlation to the nature of customer problems and how they can be resolved. It's safe to say, however, that every business will find a large percentage of its customers much happier when they can easily reach a live agent.

An all-agent model requires confidence in a skilled workforce – incompetent agents are worse than no agents. It also requires a greater investment in labor, but the growing trend towards home agents helps reduce overhead significantly.

IVR has been proven an effective technology – when it is applied properly. A well designed IVR system can reduce staffing requirements and costs, and supports those customers who prefer self-service options.

Realistically, then, the common answer is a mix of the two. Despite the successes of agent-only service operations, budget restrictions will force most businesses to automate more.

In that case, the answer seems evident: design an IVR system that makes it very easy at the outset for customers to opt out of the voice tree and secure a session with an agent. Then, it's not difficult to analyze interaction data to assess whether a more complex IVR tree would be beneficial or, on the other hand, if it is being used at a rate that renders it extraneous.

Let's face it – cost savings serve little purpose if it results in lower customer satisfaction. CIS

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by Brendan Read

Opening the Back Office/ Contact Center Door

When customers contact organizations on matters such as approvals, billing, claims, refunds and shipping, contact centers turn to the back offices that carry out these tasks. How well back offices perform impacts contact centers in meeting customers' needs.

To gain insights into this issue, Customer Interaction Solutions contacted several leading experts and asked how the effect and degree back office performance has on contact center effectiveness and how can contact centers – and their organizations – respond. Here are the highlights of their answers:

Randy Brasche, director of product marketing at Alcatel-Lucent (Genesys) (www.genesyslabs.com)

The back office has a direct effect on the contact center/ front office. A customer inquiry from the contact center often initiates a process or task in the back office. Unfortunately, the back office is extremely inefficient and is often the culprit for missing key service level agreements. The contact center is punished for the back office's transgressions from irate customers. The contact center and back office organizations are usually separate and silo'd, which further compounds the problem.

Customer service needs to become a collaborative endeavor. Customer data should be freely shared between organizations while task/work handoffs should occur seamlessly. The back office should improve its performance by adopting best-practices and technologies employed by the contact center including task segmentation/routing, automation, presence and workforce optimization (WFO).

The front office can act as the back office. Often highly skilled agents have excess capacity during low call volumes to conduct basic processing of common tasks or work-items usually reserved for the back office.

Keith Dawson, principal analyst at Frost and Sullivan (www.frost.com)

Back office performance is often measured separately from contact center performance, so they don't overlap to quite the degree that people might assume. If we're talking about the impact of having back office workers jump into contact center interactions (on the phone, or through escalation), then I think we'll see positive results on the closure rate or perhaps even the satisfaction rate.

But I don't think we really know what the impact is from a telephony standpoint, in terms of how long calls last or whether back office workers are adhering to scripts or standards. That's because back office workers are not recorded/evaluated in the same way that call center workers are; few companies have managed to bridge that gap with common measurement and training standards.

Jane Hendricks, senior manager of product marketing at Aspect (www.aspect.com)

Customer satisfaction is based on how well the enterprise works together to deliver on the promise; the customer doesn't necessarily care where or who created a delay. If the back office fails to deliver, performance metrics such as first call resolution and average handle times may suffer, but the impact to customer satisfaction and loyalty is really where the rubber meets the road.

Back office [productivity] issues stem from an often complex environment. The tasks are more complex, span multiple resources and take longer than a front-office interaction. There is reliance on multiple technologies to fulfill a task, difficulties in identifying what information to collect and actual collection of that information and a lack of established service levels.

We have seen from our customers a desire to measure back office performance and to apply WFO capabilities to it to align the total customer experience. For the contact center manager, visibility is vital to provide insight into the back office process. [They need] a degree of control over the resources and the processes so they know that the service levels they establish and communicate won't be affected. From the enterprise perspective this mastery over the back

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office ensures the delivery of a holistically positive customer experience that drives increased loyalty and better bottom line results.

Dave Hoekstra, partner development manager at GMT (www.gmt.com)

Back office plays a huge part in the overall performance of the call center, and in multiple ways. There is a very good chance that 50 percent of the incoming calls into a contact center have to do with work being done in the back office. By utilizing tools that help optimize the back office's workflow, the call center can only benefit.

One particularly unique challenge with back office is that, in a lot of cases, the talent pool for back office work comes from the call center. The center loses a talented agent to back office work, and their position must be replaced, usually from outside the call center. Call centers can respond to this challenge by utilizing blended work types that allow agents to do both types of work throughout their day, which keeps talent on the phones (facing the customer) and allows the back office work to be completed at the same time.

Rodney Kuhn, CEO, Envision (www.envisioninc.com)

Decisions, performance, and activity in the back office have significant impacts on the contact center. For example, if a back office policy changes around billing, such as a price increase, without proper notification to customers, then the contact center will likely see a significant increase in unexpected call volume. This will result in longer hold times for customers with billing issues, as well as other non-related issues, thus decreasing customer satisfaction. Contact centers should identify these dynamics and then coach agents quickly on how to respond to those calls and reduce call handle times.

Paul Leamon, director of back office solutions at NICE (www.nice.com)

In many industries, such as healthcare, financial services, telecommunications and others, the front and back office are strongly interlinked. These organizations generally struggle with two main challenges: managing productivity and quality in the back office and providing visibility to the front office (contact center) on status of back office activities.

When these two aspects are well managed, the customer ultimately benefits. The first benefit is that back office processes, such as loan or claim processing, are faster and more accurate. The second benefit is that communication about status and expectations by the contact center are accurate and limit repeat calls.

Addressing both challenges reduces unnecessary customer calls, improve customer experience and reduce back office operations costs. However, when these two aspects are not working well, there is a huge influx of calls to the contact center. If the back office is too slow or inaccurate, then the customers will call to find the status of their request, to ask when a mail order prescription will arrive or when a mortgage loan will be ready to close. The contact center managers may have to schedule overtime and hire additional staff for however long it takes to fix these back office issues.

Contact center managers can help the back office managers to understand some of the new technology that is now available to help with these issues and how to build the business case to get new technology approved.

Matt McConnell, CEO, Knowlagent (www.knowlagent.com)

The back office has not benefited from the years of efficiency nips and tucks applied to the call center…yet. And back office backlog can not only negatively impact the customer experience – it can also affect the call center. If systems are not set up to quickly and efficiently process the customer inquiries requiring back office support, customers will look to the call center for answers, adding to call volume and customer frustration.

With the right tools, call center management can enlist the support of the call center staff to help improve performance. To smooth the workload without risking service levels, management can deploy back office work to agents to be completed when they are otherwise idle. Back office tasks can be dynamically delivered directly to the agents' desktops – during unexpected dips in call volume – and when service levels rise, agents are prompted to return to answering calls.

Craig Seebach, director, WFO back-office practice, enterprise solutions, Verint Witness Actionable Solutions (www.verint.com)

The contact center and the back office form the two ends of the customer service chain. They should link together seamlessly to ensure customers are served efficiently and effectively. The back office's critical role is to execute on customer orders and inquiries received by the contact center.

Complex processes, delays in hand-offs between touch points and a heavy reliance on manual reporting make errors, incomplete orders and missed deadlines all too common. The contact center often becomes the recipient of resulting customer calls, and the target for complaints and frustration. Likewise, it frequently becomes the central hub to address and fix these issues.

Fortunately, many of today's operations executives have honed their skills in contact centers at some point in their careers. They know firsthand the impact that a WFO strategy and solution set can have on the customer experience and on internal processes, staff morale and the bottom line.

A new breed of WFO solutions have been developed from that in contact centers to meet the unique challenges of back office operations environments. These combine staff forecasting, scheduling and resource planning software with volume and data capture, quality assurance and reporting, adherence, variance measurement, performance management and training. **CIS**


five9

Keeping Universal Agents Universal

Effective time management for the multi-channel environment

Like the call center itself, the role of the call center agent is evolving. Often the "face" of the company, agents man the front lines, interacting with customers and providing them with an experience that they will ultimately use to judge your organization and brand as a whole.

To further up the ante, customers today expect a single agent to be equipped to answer and resolve all of their questions and issues. When customers call with billing and technical support questions, they prefer that the same agent be skilled enough to handle both – without having to transfer them to another department or put them on hold.

This level of service and expertise requires a special kind of agent. They must be talented, motivated, and knowledgeable about your products, services and brand. They must resolve customer issues in a single call, drive customer loyalty and have command of a wide range of technologies.

More Responsibilities = More Training, Coaching and Communications

Universal agents contribute greatly to customer satisfaction when they are on the phones, solving customer issues and promoting your brand. But they aren't always on the phones.

Agents spend around 25 percent of their day off the phones and involved in various shrinkage activities. Some of these activities – such as lunch, breaks and absenteeism – are out of your control and do not contribute to productivity. But many activities are designed to keep agents well informed and up-to-date on the critical information they need to better serve your customers.

Activities such as training, coaching, knowledge base reviews, team meetings, research, project work and one-on-one coaching make agents better. The more they know about your company, products, policies and brand, the better equipped they are to answer customer inquiries through a number of different communication channels. The best agents not only have product knowledge, they are also skilled in various technologies and able to interact with customers both on the phones as well as online. This is the very essence of what makes, and keeps, these universal agents "universal."

Three Ways to Make Idle Time Work for Universal Agents

With technology that dynamically responds to call volume and identifies natural idle times, center management can deploy the activities that make agents more productive without the need for more agents to cover calls.

Turn Idle Time into Active Wait Time

In order to handle multiple call types, universal agents must be experts in many different areas. This requires more efficiency for keeping agents informed, as well as training and coaching to ensure that they are knowledgeable and up-to-date on your company's products, services and processes.

Aggregated idle time can be used during periods of low call volume for agents to read important internal communications or complete training and coaching between calls.

Bundle Off-line Activities

Typically, agents have a few sporadic minutes between calls, but it's not enough time to complete off-phone work, resulting in the need to schedule these activities.

When small increments of idle time from all agents is aggregated and delivered to a smaller group as a 5-20 minute block, these agents can focus on assigned activities from training sessions to knowledge base reviews or even time to read and respond to e-mails.

Complete the Most Important Work First

When agents do find enough downtime to work on non-scheduled work, it's unlikely they would prioritize activities in the same manner as management would.

Supervisors or managers can prioritize activities for individual agents so when these productive work sessions are delivered dynamically, idle time is optimized.

Making idle time productive helps you to find the time to keep these universal agents up to date. The information the universal agent needs to be effective already exists within your organization. Dynamically delivering sessions to agents' desktops allows them to access the information they need and ensures that they focus on the most important activities first.

Universal agents are able to complete the activities that make them "universal" while sitting at their desks, waiting for the next call.

Knowlagent is the leading agent productivity solution for the world's 10 million call center agents. For more information, visit www.knowlagent.com. **CIS**

Avaya's New Aura Contact Center 6.2, Aura Experience Portal Integrates Channels

Multichannel integration – to meaningfully interact with customers in real-time regardless of means. Landline or mobile has become imperative for enterprises if they wish to retain and grow market share. A study for Avaya (www.avaya.com) by callcentres.net reveals that 40 percent of customers state they prefer interactions taking place over non-voice channels to calls for customer service.

Moreover, social media use by customers and by employees for interactions is growing. And there are now reports that company staff are going "rogue" by responding to comments and posts outside of corporate frameworks which risks mixed messaging by different staff and confusion for all the world to see.

To enable effective – and managed – multichannel interactions, Avaya has now come out with Avaya Aura Contact Center 6.2 and Avaya Aura Experience Portal, formerly the Avaya Voice Portal, which, says Jorge Blanco, vice president, marketing, contact center says is "akin to two halves of the brain." And to train it Avaya now offers consulting services.

Social Media, Collaboration Featured

Avaya Aura Contact Center 6.2 features tighter and simplified integration between all live assistance channels. One of the most important is building in Avaya Social Media Manager to the platform. Avaya Social Media Manager automatically monitors, captures and suggests responses to agents to relevant tweets and Facebook updates for personalized responses.

The solution manages the huge information flow through using keywords or phrases set by businesses to avoid "tweet deluges". Meanwhile sentiment track, assigning scores to communication such as tweets (specifically, higher positive number = more positive sentiment), can identify trends in real-time, and which users are driving them, to enable immediate, relevant responses. It also tracks and alerts when anyone in the organization comments on social media to ensure accurate, brand-supporting and corporate policy-abiding messaging.

Another key Avaya Aura Contact Center 6.2 feature is enhanced-assisted experience with new expert collaboration capabilities via Avaya Session Manager, which uses session-based communications architecture as opposed to traditional CTI. With it, when a customer contact arrives, the agent's portal displays the appropriate experts and their presence. Managers can also create custom views or large groups of experts based on available times and skills. The Avaya Session Manager can take social media comments and create what Blanco calls "anchored sessions" on the Avaya Contact Center platform for multichannel interactions.

Avaya has made the Avaya Aura Contact Center 6.2 more scalable and efficiently suitable for the largest enterprises and the smaller firms alike; version 6.0 had been aimed at midsized contact centers. Via new integration with Avaya Aura Communication Manager, Avaya trebled the interaction nodes from 1,000 to 3,000 agents with support of up to 90,000 agents in a single virtual network for Avaya Aura Contact Center 6.2. At the same time it can scale down to as low as to 75-200 agents.

Self-Service Improvements

The Avaya Aura Experience Portal manages self-service interactions. It has tighter integration with the Avaya Aura Contact Center to enable seamless customer hand-offs and their context from self-service sessions to live or automated agents. This feature eliminates the frustration of them repeating data already captured in self-service. It supports outbound notifications and eventually predictive dialing.

Application development is faster in the Avaya Aura Experience Portal through employing the new Avaya Orchestration Designer, which permits creating new multimedia self-service applications using existing Web applications. It includes new development tools to address hand-offs from self service to assisted care, a critical element, the firm says "for maintaining positive customer experiences."

Avaya has also made self-service more cost-effective via the Avaya Aura Experience Portal. The product now can be deployed in a virtualized environment, which converts a single server into multiple virtual servers. This reduces a business' hardware footprint, lowering capital and operating expenses.

Both products improve investment protection. Avaya Aura Contact Center 6.2's multimedia capabilities are now unified with Avaya's ACD application, Avaya Aura Call Center Elite, enabling unified desktop, reporting and administration. Avaya Experience Portal software and tools unify open standards migration of open standards-based applications from Avaya Interactive Response, Avaya Media Processing Server (formerly Nortel's self-service platform) and Avaya Voice Portal. CIS

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by Brendan Read

The Home Agent Handshake

The key to having hands shook on any deal is conclusively answering the objections by those whose buy-in is sought. This is especially critical when the agreement involves radical changes by the prospective customers in how they do business – to overcome their built-in inertia.

These conditions most apply for contact centers in deciding whether or not to go with home-based agents. This is one of the most literally visible (or rather invisible) and revolutionary moves most organizations can make, requiring a different way in organizing operations and in training and managing staff.

Home Agent Benefits

Home/telework can generate cost savings and productivity gains of over $10,000 per employee/year reports the Telework Research Network (TRN). Contact centers gain increased flexibility, higher quality staff, can shrink churn and improve business continuity while cutting facilities expenses.

Home-based staff deliver stronger performances than their brick-and-mortar counterparts. TRN points to BPO firm Alpine Access, whose home agents closed 30 percent more sales than brick-and-mortar agents the year before, while customer complaints decreased by 90 percent and turnover dropped by 88 percent.

Making the home agent handshake possible are methods and technologies that have been developed and proved out. These include screening and hiring for mature self-starter agents and deploying cloud/hosted platforms, desktop dashboards, performance management/quality monitoring (PM/QM) solutions, secure desktops, softphones, VoIP and VPNs.

Alternatively, firms can "go home" via BPOs. This is proving to be a popular option because these companies have already done, Frost & Sullivan principal analyst Michael DeSalles points out, "the heavy lifting" on home agent program setup and management.

So why are companies reluctant to shake on the home agent deal? DeSalles alludes to too few case studies for in-house programs that demonstrate ROI; companies do not generally publicize them.

"The question faced by firms is 'how do we do this right and smart so that we only do this once?' but there are few examples for them to follow," explains DeSalles. "And right now for organizations, there is no perceived compelling reason or urgency, no pandemic or other disasters that are sufficiently powerful to send agents home."

IDing the Objections

Here are the key home agent objections gathered from contact center experts and suppliers:

1. Hiring and training

Home agents, by definition, require firms to move away from in-person screening and training. The emerging best practices are for home-based staff to be recruited separately from their brick-and-mortar counterparts with distinct profiles for each and not have them travel in for training, which means they can be hired from outside of commute/travel distance to the nearest center, broadening the labor pools. Many contact centers have found that agents recruited for traditional office environments typically do not perform well at home.

2. Supervision

The technology is not the issue here. Instead it is the people side, how agents are supervised that is the biggest stumbling block.

Patrick Botz, vice president of workforce optimization at VPI points out that many contact center supervisors still sit with agents to monitor performance. Agents are pulled routinely from their desks for classroom training and updated by regular glances at the centers' wall boards.

Moreover, many supervisors do not know how to manage employees who are sight unseen. They look at bodies rather than at what matters, which is how their staff are performing.

3. Security

The worry is that there could be more security breaches with home agents than with their brick-and-mortar counterparts. One example is a friend, a family member or roommate looking over a home worker's shoulder.

4. Communication

How can supervisors effectively impart messaging such as adherence levels, calls in queue, first call resolution rates and sales figures to agents outside of the contact center?

"Contact center supervisors are challenged to keep home-based agents aware of what's happening in the brick-and-mortar center," reports Pete Sisti, CEO of Inova Solutions. "How are they supposed to know to adjust talk times and make other necessary changes in real-time, to accommodate changing business conditions?"

5. Community

How do you foster a sense of community with agents who work remotely? There is a risk that these employees will not subscribe to their companies' culture as effectively as their brick-and-mortar counterparts.

6. Investment

It can cost $200-$1,000 per employee to set up home-based agents reports Michele Rowan, president of At Home Customer Contacts. Different equipment needs, such as modifying ACDs, shipping computers or deploying locked-down applications on agents' personal machines and hard versus softphones, plus remote/virtual training expenses, account for the variation.

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7. Senior Management Buy-in

This is the killer "yes" or "no" and it is often based on perceptions by C-suite and midlevel executives that employees will not work as expected (or as hard) if out of eyesight.

Answering the Concerns

Methods and tools have been developed that can answer many of these concerns about home agents. Here they are:

1. Specific home agent hiring profiles and virtualized training

For hiring, the emerging set of best practices is recruiting experienced agents and screening them for resourcefulness and self-discipline. Applicants should also have basic technical skills to solve IT issues at their end; there are no help desk on their doorsteps.

For training, TeleTech, which has an extensive home agent program, recommends virtual training programs.

"Virtual training is not impeded by the constraints of scheduling or class size, often rendering it faster and more effective than in-person training," explains P.J. Weyforth, senior vice president of TeleTech@Home. "Ongoing collaborative training efficiently serves associates [contact center agents] in an ever-changing, customer-driven environment."

2. Resolving supervision issues requires a multifaceted approach:

(a) Firms should document the home/remote job responsibilities, requirements (such as no background noise), procedures, policies and time frames, recommends Frost and Sullivan.

"Setting clear, up-front expectations and having appropriate work guidelines supported by well-designed quality assurance processes can solve this concern," says Lister

(b) Home agents would be overseen by supervisors trained to manage-by-performance backed with 100 percent contact (call and screen) recording and with team tools such as collaboration and desktop dashboards as well as wallboard electronic displays.

"The same advanced contact-center management tools and resources that are available to traditional contact-center agents should also be provided to remote agents," says DeSalles. "After all, the goal is to coach in order to accelerate performance and drive higher levels of customer satisfaction."

(c) Extending QM and recording tools to home agents, thereby ensuring productivity and compliance

VPI's VPI QUALITY enables managers to objectively evaluate home-based agent behaviors, provide timely feedback and support and boost service quality and cultivate customer experience and loyalty. This system is highly effective, says Botz, in both traditional contact centers and with home-based agents.

Mariann McDonagh, inContact CMO points out that contact centers can and do use voice of customer surveys as well as QM solutions for their home agents.

"If you have a large brick-and-mortar call center, you can't watch over every agent's shoulder, all day, every day," McDonagh points out. "You have to rely on key performance indicators and recording and monitoring tools to ensure that agents are performing to the level expected by your organization. At-home agents are much the same. You can utilize technology to ensure that agents are working and performing well."

(d) Productivity-enhancing tools. One example is Knowlagent's RightTime, which aggregates agent idle time into larger, usable segments. This solution improves home agent productivity and performance while keeping these employees as informed, on top of best practices and connected as those physically located in the contact center, says CEO Matt McConnell.

3. Security concerns can and are being answered through a variety of tools

BPO firms present best practices on home agent security, especially going the extra mile to assure clients. DeSalles is seeing BPO firms deploy two-to-three-factor authentication for home agent logins.

"Technology makes home offices run as if an employee were sitting in a corporate location, complete with highly secure Internet connections and, secure workstation technology," says Weyforth.

Yet how big is security an issue? At Home Customer Contacts conducted a survey earlier this year involving over 90 companies that use home agents who were asked to compare fraud incident levels at home versus in-house. 95 percent of companies reported that these were the same or less at home.

4. Virtual desktop wallboards can communicate to home-based agents the same information received by their premise-based colleagues.

One example of virtual wallboards is Inova Solutions' Inova Marquee. It mirrors the content of a physical LED wallboard – including font effects, graphics and animations.

5. Community can be fostered through chat, team meetings and more recently by social media

"Chat ends up replacing the 'head popping over the cubicle' effect," reports McDonagh. "I've spoken with call center managers that employ at-home agents who consider their chat tool to be a mission-critical offering, because it enables so much employee engagement, particularly with escalations. Additionally, with the prevalence of social media channels, many agents engage with one another in their off time via social media, which gives a sense of community and engagement that transcends the 'walls' of the contact center."

6. Investment costs can be significantly reduced by going to the cloud/hosting

Hosted switching, routing and other solutions are location-agnostic and it minimizes administration and IT support costs including upgrades and bug fixes. It can supplement or supplant premise-licensed hardware and/or software.

7. Management buy-in through by soft sell

When the obstacles are in the C-suite, Rowan recommends feeding information and education to them about the home/remote agent model but pause on the hard-sell. Sooner or later, when posed with the question "justify why contact center employees need to occupy this expensive office space", the light will go off, she says and they will come around on their own. CIS

by Brendan Read

Continuing the Service

Contact centers are moving from the periphery to the core of organizations, serving as their interfaces with customers, thereby enabling them to stay in and grow their businesses. It is becoming increasingly imperative then to continue service to customers and if that is not possible to inform them what is happening when disasters threaten and strike. This is on top of protecting employees' lives in the event of such events. Together that means firms may have to look again at their business continuity/disaster recovery (BC/DR) strategies.

Customer Interaction Solutions discussed the latest trends with two leading business continuity experts:

- Margaret Jordan, vice president, global project management office Sitel (www.sitel.com)
- Steve Waken, assistant vice president, corporate business continuity planning, AT&T (www.att.com)

CIS: How critical is it for live agent, general customer service and sales contact centers to remain in operation during disasters? Has this increased or decreased in importance over the past five years and if so why?

Jordan: In the event of a disaster or disruptive event, it is of our utmost importance to provide live support during all times. The benefits are widespread. Little impact or interruptions means superior customer service is always upheld, with minimal financial losses. Our crisis teams are continually engaged to ensure operations are retained as quickly as possible. Many of our clients also have secondary hot sites for immediate re-location in this situation.

We experienced one recent situation, in which the client was impacted with an unforeseen evacuation. We put the systems in place to ensure our client was back up and running at the hot site in just minutes, with minimal interruptions.

We are also being more proactive, especially for those clients without a secondary location. In the event something occurs, we immediately create and launch emergency messaging for customers informing them of a closure. We also set up call routing, re-allocating our resources within minutes, instead of the several hours it can normally take. If there is any downtime, it is a lot less than what we might have experienced in similar situations just a few years ago.

Waken: When natural disasters and unexpected events occur, it is absolutely vital to minimize risk to employees, customers and the public, reduce disruptions to operations and protect essential assets. With a contact center serving as the front door to the business, maintaining a fully functional contact center can be the lifeline for how enterprises manage through crisis events.

Contact centers work to ensure continued client operations in disaster situations. Those that use an array of automation services can accomplish call fulfillment in a highly efficient and effective manner, even when resources are limited during an emergency. Operating contact centers during disasters helps to satisfy the needs of demanding customers, who want always-on access to support and sales services, and reassures them that the business that they are counting on is still putting them first. Keeping sales centers open contributes to new revenue generation, and maintaining support centers helps with customer satisfaction and retention.

AT&T Customer Service Centers play a critical role for customers who may have lost their homes or otherwise relocated after a disaster. For example, a family who has lost their home (and their telephone line), can contact an AT&T service representative to activate a new line or forward their home number to their cell phone.

It's also important to coach call center employees on emergency procedures. If there is a fire or tornado, how do you account for everyone? Have you discussed family emergency plans? (http://www.ready.gov/) Have any employees been personally impacted by loss of home or family members? What services can the company provide to those employees? Establishing and discussing these issues before a disaster enables you to quickly react and inspires confidence that you are prepared.

CIS: There have been changes in the methods and technologies used by contact centers, such as home agents, cloud computing, SIP Trunking, self-service, and UC.

How and which ones have had significant impacts on contact center/customer service business continuity/disaster response (BC/DR) strategies? For example, which processes and tools have these supplanted?

Waken: Remote and home-based worker solutions are highly useful in disasters and emergencies or even in inclement weather. Through services such as remote VPN, contact center agents can access the tools, resources, applications and data they need to perform their job functions effectively, outside of the contact center itself.

Cloud services offer great potential in business continuity/disaster recovery in contact centers and in other settings. With flexible, reliable, on-demand access to company data from almost any device, almost anywhere, the cloud can host an array

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of information for contact centers. Cloud storage can backup an entire business's data, expanding and contracting to meet company needs.

Using network-based SIP routing capabilities provides the ability to get clients to the right customer service centers that are available to address their concerns the first time they call. As the need to respond to an emergency situation arises, businesses can develop new routing plans and invoke alternate business rules to direct calls to the most available resources at the time.

Self-service websites work well for answering many customer questions, but many still want the personalized experience of speaking to a live agent. While features such as chat, FAQ and notifications can contribute to a reduction in call volumes, they haven't and likely will not displace contact centers.

UC/UM features allow contact centers to send group notifications, emails and voicemails. During any type of disaster, maintaining communications with employees, customers and shareholders is critical to managing through an event to keep everyone informed, mitigate panic and continue critical business functions. UC/UM infrastructure can be hosted off-site, providing a layer of defense against damage in an emergency.

All of these developments in contact center technology offer greater protection to the business during a disaster situation, but it are still important to consider using onsite generators, recovery rooms and other backup systems. Business continuity and disaster recovery strategies should take into account all possibilities.

CIS: Has the gradual switch of personal communications from landlines to wireless-including from voice to text impacted on the ability of contact centers to reach out to employees before, during and after disasters? If so, then how?

Jordan: The move to mobile communications has allowed us to be a lot more efficient in this area. We're now able to reach associates through text messaging with important details, including emergency contact information and blog site information. During a severe tornado last year in Alabama, we used text messaging to locate 95 percent of our staff within five hours of the event. We recently acquired satellite phones for sites in hurricane/typhoon-prone locations, further ensuring we gain full access to key personnel during an event that will likely affect regular cell phone communications.

Waken: Yes, these shifts in technology have impacted how contact centers reach out to employees in a positive way. Instead of utilizing old-fashioned phone trees, companies can send out mass text messages, e-mails and voicemails to alert contact center agents to impending emergencies.

People are more connected by way of technology today than ever before, so it's often easier to make contact. For instance, if an employee is driving into work during a rainstorm, but the company has decided to shut down the contact center due to flooding, they can be reached through a text message or a mobile phone call.

In addition, wireless service providers back up their networks with a great deal of contingency planning, to ensure that they can maintain functionality for their customers during emergencies. Wired phone lines are more susceptible to weather events or other disasters, as they depend on the physical infrastructure of telephone poles and cables.

Text messaging also offers a great alternative to voice calls during a disaster. The phone lines in the impacted area may be congested due to the number of people trying to contact loved ones – texting can often get through where voice calls can't, helping everyone quickly find out if their families are safe.

The best strategy for contact centers is geographic diversity. Having the ability to route customer calls to a different location significantly increases business resiliency. Self-service via the web, outsourcing and remote work are also great strategies that often provide non-disaster related benefits. **CIS**

Every minute counts:

Are you getting the most out of your Web-generated leads?

Are you getting the most out of your Web-generated leads? As more and more people adopt the Internet as a standard method of communication, organizations are seeing Web-generated leads double or even triple. That's good news. The problem arises when companies lack the capacity or strategy to effectively respond to increasing online lead intake.

By Rob Sine,
Director of New Business Development
InfoCision Management Corporation

The passage of time poses a real problem in the sales world. A couple quick ticks of the clock can mean the difference between acquiring a new customer or losing it to a competitor. This time crunch is further amplified on the Web, where users expect even greater immediacy. While it may not be uncommon for organizations to wait days to respond to Web-generated leads, it is certainly detrimental to their ability to qualify and convert those leads.

Observing the challenges faced by organizations ill-equipped for online lead overflow, InfoCision recently developed a packaged solution to help companies quickly and effectively respond to web-generated leads. We learned a few key lessons while producing this service. These are things every organization should keep in mind when developing a progressive strategy to handle Web-generated leads:

Speed makes a difference: Step on the gas

This may seem obvious to anyone who's ever worked in sales. But, for some reason, Web-generated leads just aren't given the same weight as leads that come in over the phone or via referral. This can be a critical oversight. These days, a lot of people use the Internet to make initial contact with an organization. This is their first impression of the organization, and the speed of your response can make all the difference.

I'm not talking hours here; I'm talking minutes – maybe even seconds. By waiting a day or more to contact a Web-generated lead, you essentially negate your chances of ever qualifying or converting them. An Insidesales.com/MIT Lead Response Management Study – which focused on the question, "When should companies call Web-generated leads for optimal contact and qualification ratios?")— unearthed these eye-opening findings:

The odds of contacting a lead if called in 30 minutes, instead of 5 minutes, drop 100 times.

The odds of qualifying a lead if called in 30 minutes, instead of 5 minutes, drop 21 times.

Companies can't afford to snooze on Web-generated leads. While you're waiting to initiate contact, your lead is drifting over to your competitor's website and giving them the chance to beat you to the punch. If you have the opportunity to make first contact, it's imperative you take it. With Web-generated leads, speed carries an incredible advantage. Step on the gas.

First contact counts: Put knowledgeable people on the line

Despite the importance of a quick call (which I can't emphasize enough), speed is not the only difference maker. As always, people matter. Even if you contact a lead instantly, it will only be effective if the right person makes the call. By "right" person, I mean someone who is knowledgeable about the specific program/service/product in which the individual is interested (which should be a standard question on any Web information request form) and the organization. Even if the person making the call is just the first contact and not the final destination, he should be able to answer initial questions and reinforce the lead's interest in the organization and the product or service.

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by Rob Sine, Director of New Business Development, InfoCision Management Corporation

That means you need to make sure your lead responders – whether in-house or outsourced – are familiar with questions prospects are likely to ask, as well as information about specific programs or services. If possible, you should integrate a system to ensure Web-generated leads are swiftly routed to individuals with the greatest knowledge of the program, product or service of interest. Obviously, sales representatives are not always going to have the ability to make these initial calls – nor, necessarily, should they. Contacting and qualifying duties can eat up a lot of time. That's time sales reps could better spend attending to qualified leads. Having knowledgeable people to make immediate contact and potentially qualify leads beforehand can allow your sales staff to focus solely on conversions.

Data is golden: Equip yourself to adapt and adjust

When setting up a web-generated lead response system, there is a great opportunity to incorporate a means of collecting and analyzing data to help streamline future lead-response interactions. Unfortunately, due to complexity and cost, many organizations fail to take this step – or they view it as an afterthought. The result is loss of an incredibly valuable asset: data. Collected data can be immediately beneficial, helping you create customized callback strategies for leads you can't reach on the first attempt. Using "best time to call" information or intelligence from previous interactions, you can produce personalized follow-up plans to increase efficiency and make every dial count.

Ideally, you also want to have a system that lets you conveniently monitor your online lead intake in real time. This way, you can make sure your Web-generated lead response strategy is always working effectively and efficiently and, if not, you can make adjustments on the fly (like bringing in additional people at recognized peak periods). You also can use your collected data to identify: (1) who your Web-generated leads are (what they are interested in, how they differ from other leads); and (2) what questions they have or what offers appeal to them. In the long run, quality monitoring, reporting and analysis can play a key role in helping you optimize your lead-response strategy.

Opportunity knocks: Get ahead of the game

It's always a good idea when implementing new services or capabilities to make them as future-proof as possible. Think multichannel. Explore the potential of your online lead response system – how can it integrate with other initiatives or campaigns: direct mail, email, even personalized URLS. Think about how you want to expand your acquisition efforts in the future, and how that will influence the communication needs of your potential customers. Devise your strategy accordingly.

The quantity of online leads you receive will only rise as more people integrate the Web as an everyday communication tool. If you are already experiencing a steady volume of Web-generated inquiries, don't expect those numbers to diminish any time soon. Be ready to respond, and respond quickly. By having an effective strategy for contacting Web-generated leads with speed and efficiency, you can convert more leads and prepare yourself for a channel that will see more and more traffic moving into the future. Take the opportunity to get ahead of the game now while you still can.

Rob Sine is Director of New Business Development at InfoCision Management Corporation. Reach him at Robert.Sine@InfoCision.com. In business since 1982, InfoCision is the second-largest privately held teleservices company and a leading provider of direct marketing solutions for Fortune 100 companies, nonprofit organizations and small businesses. Learn more about ACSELL, InfoCision's turnkey, multichannel solution for responding to web-generated leads at www.RapidResponseRouting.com. CIS

by Brendan Read

Q&A On Analytics With CSI's Rich Marcia

Analytics – turning data into intelligence – is hot and Coordinated Systems, Inc (CSI) (www.csiworld.com), a longtime leading call recording and quality monitoring (QM) solutions firm, is in the kitchen.

CSI's new Virtual Observer 4.0 (VO 4) features speech and enhanced dashboard analytics, integrated scoring, screen capture, performance and trending reports, along with e-learning and VO Live for real-time agent monitoring and assistance. VO 4 is also available via web browsers with all the same robust QM features as in the client-server version.

Customer Interaction Solutions recently interviewed Rich Marcia, CSI's marketing director, on analytics issues. Here is the discussion:

CIS: What business needs are you seeing a growing demand to meet and why?

RM: I am seeing high demand for tools which focus on the customer experience (retention). It's more and more vital to retain your current base versus spending tremendous monies chasing new business. There is also strong interest in supporting web chat as a channel. One of our customers, a large expo producer, has noticed a large percentage (20 percent) of customer traffic now flowing through that channel. A good many other customers say they can see a point where web chats will exist alongside recorded calls, screens and e-mails.

CIS: Individual customer interaction channels have been housed in silos, making it difficult to obtain 360-degree insights via the information they collect on which to perform analytics. What strategies do you recommend in response to break these down?

RM: It's becoming more apparent that the applications we use today and in the future will be required to be open and to offer an API for easy access to data to enable realtime multichannel analytics, otherwise you will need to build a custom connector every time you're looking to share data with other applications.

CIS: Firms appear to be more so in an "I-want-it-yesterday" mode when it comes to information, intelligence and insight. Are you seeing this and what are the drivers?

RM: This is most definitely the case. We're now fashioning our performance reporting data as real-time, multi-level widgets which can be inserted into any users' custom dashboard environment. The main drivers for this would be a need for speed in all areas of business analytics. The faster you get your data, the faster you can analyze it and make decisions based on it. We've equipped VO 4 to offer a wide range of dashboard analytics to meet this demand.

CIS: Social media has rapidly emerged as an important new channel. Discuss the benefits and the challenges in obtaining insights from the social channel via analytics.

RM: Many companies are now using social media to interact with customers. These channels are recognized as just another recordable interaction method such as by e-mail, chat, phone, SMS, Twitter and Facebook. Catalog/retail customers are early adopters in bringing this into their recordable events stream.

CIS: Analytics solutions have been criticized for being expensive and cumbersome to install and maintain, limiting their potential use. Please discuss.

RM: Our performance reporting has always been included as part of our robust quality optimization suite. We've also included our trending reports, dashboard designer and real-time dashboard analytics with the core Virtual Observer solution. Customers who have added our Call Insight Speech Analytics module have also received real-time data reporting as part of the package. We don't view analytics as an "optional" component. It's a "must-have". Our visual Phonetic Discovery report updates in real-time and displays phrases detected from the speech index. The larger the phrase, the more frequently it is found.

CIS: What new and enhanced multichannel analytics solutions have been developed in response to contact center requirements and which address these issues?

RM: Our road map for VO 4 and beyond is to incorporate aggressive quality optimization enhancements which are unique to our space and provide instant value to the contact center. We've completely rewritten our reporting and fine tuned our dashboard presentation to deliver a very clean multi-level summary of live real-time information. We'll be taking advantage of the web environment to continue bringing enhancements and useful tools for our customer base. **CIS**


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by Brendan Read

2011 Customer Interaction Solutions TMC Labs Innovation Awards

This year marks the 12th installment for the prestigious TMC Labs Innovation Awards in Customer Interaction Solutions, where TMC Labs analyzes dozens of applicants to find the most unique and innovative products. Contact centers are constantly looking to increase agent productivity, reduce costs, and improve customer satisfaction through the utilization of innovative products, from all-in-one suites to targeted add-ons. Like last year we have quite a few hosted offerings, but this year's winners represent a very diverse range of technologies, featuring everything from hosted file storage to hosted workforce management. With the growth of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and now the emergence of Google+, it's no surprise we have at least one winner that directly integrates with social media.

We are proud to bestow this award to the 17 worthy companies listed below, including both household industry names and some newer entrants. In-depth write-ups will be featured on TMCnet as well as in the October issue of the magazine. CIS

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SOTEL systems

by Shama Kabani, CEO, The Marketing Zen Group and Jennifer Wilson, Product Manager, Interactive Intelligence

The Social Alphabet

What You Need to Know About Social Media as the Ultimate Communication Channel

The possibility is mind-boggling. To a business, social networks can mean the potential access to millions of people who are constantly sharing and looking for information — or in more direct business terms, "far-reaching connections to consumers, customers and potential customers in the global marketplace, in virtually every demographic, in near real-time." Fundamentally, becoming social also gives businesses and their contact centers an opportunity to build their brands — as well as pipelines, customer relationships, and more favorable reputations for the products they sell and the services they provide. That makes social media the ultimate communication channel for most any business.

The Alphabet For Social Media Success

An effective place to start is by understanding some basic guidelines for social initiatives and the contact center's role in managing them. In other words, learn your social alphabet first, and social media success will follow.

For now, here are some of the more critical guidelines. You can read the rest of the Social Alphabet in the whitepaper "The Social Alphabet: What You Need to Know About Social Media as the Ultimate Communication Channel." Download it at www.inin.com/Whitepapers.

ATTRACT. Launch a Facebook page, build social media into your contact center's customer service strategy and incorporate social sites into your web site's product pages. If you're a B2B business, form a LinkedIn discussion group and start a blog full of rich content to increase SEO rankings to other businesses. Do everything possible to attract customers, their feedback, and their loyalty.

BUZZ. There's creating a buzz about a new product by way of social media users "spreading the word," which can equate to free advertising and some serious lead generation Then there's monitoring the conversations, or "buzz," about your brand, in which case responding to ALL feedback is critical. Especially when the buzz is negative, the reaction time needs to be immediate.

DEFINE (your campaign). As in, an outbound customer service campaign to post helpful hints, solutions to problems, product updates, new services, etc., including how to monitor and respond to comments. Narrowly defining such a campaign helps give your brand a stronger online identity, and unites your customers under those characteristics in their social networks.

FOLLOW-UP. Don't let social media comments fall through the cracks. Automate contact center processes for follow-up with the ability to route and monitor social interactions based on agent skills, availability and priority, just like all other forms of communication.

INTEGRATION. Think response methods, then think of ways to integrate social media into existing CRM and business applications to help streamline these efforts. Integrating social media into the contact center and treating it like any other interaction is helpful as well, especially to keep track of customer information and interaction history.

MULTICHANNEL APPROACH. In many ways, social media is similar to other multichannel communications, and should be handled with the same awareness. When customers are able to communicate in the way they prefer — and responded to in kind — satisfaction increases tremendously.

RESPONSE. Simple replies to a customer's tweet or Facebook post can make them feel appreciated. Leverage your communications platform to automate rapid responses, and to track customer interactions overall. A consolidated look at how your customers interact with you across the board is also a great reporting and prioritization tool, particularly for when and how to respond "socially."

SENTIMENT. Social monitoring tools in the contact center let you route social interactions to the appropriate agent based on the sentiment of posts, negative or positive. Based on the sentiment score, items can also be escalated to a supervisor for follow up as needed, including ensuring that highly negative posts are responded to immediately.

WORDS (matter). Set up alerts for industry-related or branded keywords to audit your online reputation and respond accordingly and correctly. Social monitoring tools automate notifications based on each keyword spotted, and can score and prioritize items based on the sentiment used. You can also use keywords to gather analytics on what's being said about your brand, and how the brand is trending.

WHAT NOW? A few other things to consider when implementing your social media strategy: Ask your customers and partners how they're using social media. Research the competition to help decide what makes the most sense for your company. Determine whether to leverage social media for advertising and brand awareness, as an channel for customer service and inquiries, or for a combination of such uses. And again, to manage your social media strategy and make it the ultimate communication channel for your business, consider the technical and staffing resources you'll need, how you'll monitor it, and how you'll respond to all those potential new customers you connect with. **CIS**

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MARKETPLACE

IDENTIFICATION STATEMENT

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Cleaning Off Telemarketing's Tarnish

It only takes a few, tarnished pieces for observers to assume that the rest of the silverware is junk. These observations go for a wide range of other goods and services. That includes, unfortunately, telemarketing and BPO/teleservices.

This, specifically our, industry has long had a deservedly tarnished reputation on two scores. First: with many consumers and their advocates and lawmakers for pushy, annoying and sometimes lawbreaking live agent and automated messaging calling on behalf of its clients. Second: with communities for being terrible employers with low pay, minimal or no benefits, poor training and lousy supervision leading to high turnover, who shutter their doors as soon as the contracts end and/or the taxpayer-financed location incentives runs out.

The first issue set has been largely dealt with by stringently enforced legislation and regulations that have done the industry a favor by forcing it to clean up its act, if only to prevent it from being publicly caned. Even so there are still outfits – and by extension their clients – that still annoy consumers and who carelessly or intentionally violate the laws.

The second set needs more work. Telemarketing and BPO/teleservices firms' sometimes poor reputations as businesses have given politicians more reasons to swing at them. One individual who did that won election in a Canadian community that had attracted several contact centers both in-house and BPO.

Sadly, there continue to be industry companies whose management mistreats their employees. Teleperformance USA had to pay almost $2 million in back overtime wages following a U.S. Department of Labor investigation in 2010. And just recently, IQT bolted the doors of its Canadian operations, throwing over 1,000 staff onto the street from centers in Oshawa, Ontario and in Laval and Trois Rivières, Quebec with no notice, no pay or as required in Canada, vacation pay. Meanwhile it had snagged a deal to move operations to Nashville, Tenn., aided, reported CityNews Toronto, by a $1.6 million incentives package.

"Management and employees at the Laval office confirmed Friday they found the doors shut and communications dead when they arrived for the early shift, and police were on hand," The (Montreal Quebec, Canada) Gazette reported July 16th. "They said they had not been paid for two weeks and they had no prior warning of the shutdown."

If job-seeking Nashville residents had any reason to be overjoyed they were soon proven wrong. CityNews Toronto revealed on July 20th that the U.S. deal had gone south.

"We are dismayed about what happened in Canada and don't think workers anywhere should be treated that way," city official Matt Wiltshire said a statement released on Tuesday July 19th.

Yes, business needs change. Teleservices companies are, at their core, contractors that ramp up and down with clients' programs. This means staffing levels must and do change if there is not sufficient work coming in over a period of time – each responsible outfit factors in lulls – to keep employees on the phones. There is a therefore a stronger risk of layoffs for job seekers if they sign on with these companies.

There is no excuse for IQT's behavior though. The firm disrespected the rights of those who worked for it. Its moves smacks of panic-driven management who could not face the consequences of the events and their acts, like those of hit-and-run drivers.

There is a need for tougher laws to offset such short/no-notice closures on employees, and on taxpayers who must pick up the added welfare tabs. Companies should be required to form self-insurance pools – with the amounts appropriate to the risks in each sector – with payouts to laid-off workers. Alternatively, if firms receive tax incentives they should post bonds.

Trade associations such as the ATA, ATSI, DMA and others must do their self-regulatory share. They should publicly censure, if not throw out, members who break the law, alert authorities if they hear of possible wrongdoing and let go staff without paying severance. Clients must do their part by quit buying mainly by price – you get what you pay for – and end being overly aggressive on results that lead to corners being cut. They can shop for vendors with good employee and compliance reputations.

The only way our industry can shine is by quickly detecting the spots and cleaning the wares. Doing so will demonstrate the value of the many fine BPO/teleservices companies that are there as businesses, employers and taxpayers, and the services they provide. CIS