



by Richard Snow | 12/20/2007 | Article ID: V07-55 | Article Type: VentanaView | © 2007 Ventana Research

Summary

Customers are increasingly intolerant of bad service from companies, whether it occurs in an interpersonal or electronic interaction. Time and cost constraints are pushing companies to make more interactions electronic. This makes it much harder to judge the quality of the customer's experience, which in turn makes it harder to improve that experience. However, the potential to improve either situation is improving as vendors come to market with products that can help analyze different forms of data. As better analytic information becomes available, companies can begin to assess the effectiveness of their interaction-handling processes and figure out how to improve them.

View

There are two distinct aspects of handling customer interaction: managing how and where to deliver the interaction and managing the information delivered during the interaction. Although the means of delivery has some effect on the customer experience, the stronger impact comes from the actual contact; for example, a call could be delivered to the apparently most qualified agent, but if that person doesn't have enough information to handle it well, the customer's experience will be negative.

In terms of delivery, the channel of communication is the first consideration. Benchmark research from Ventana Research found that to meet customers' expectations, companies need to support an increasing range of channels, including telephone (both fixed and mobile), e-mail, fax, postal mail, the Web, instant messaging and video (and don't forget face-to-face meetings). To do all this requires a variety of hardware and software tools. Our research shows that increasingly most channels will be run on voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) networks from vendors such as Avaya and Cisco.

The next issue is where the customer contact is delivered, which could be to a machine – typically interactive voice response (IVR) – or to a person based in a contact center, a home agent, a mobile worker such as a field service engineer, a back-office employee in finance, sales or marketing, or someone working in a branch office. Whatever the choice, this can be achieved by implementing computer/telephony integration (CTI) and routing software from vendors such as Cisco and Genesys. These technologies can be enhanced to make routing more intelligent by integration with customer and agent databases and rules engines that ensure the most-qualified person receives the call. The final piece of the jigsaw is to have the right profile of skilled agents' available to match the pattern of inbound interactions, increasing the probability that the interaction will be handled by the best qualified person. This can be achieved by implementing an agent workforce management product from vendors such as Genesys, IEX (part of NICE systems), InVision, Witness Actionable Systems (part of Verint) and VPI.

Managing the information supplied at the time of the interaction is a complex process. The first requirement is to know what sort of interactions customers have had in the past, what the outcomes were and why they are calling now. Assembling this can be difficult for companies because they must pull together data not just from all the systems involved in delivering the interaction but also from the transactional systems used to manage the company's business processes (such as enterprise resource planning, customer relationship management, billing or knowledge management). This data comes in a variety of forms: structured data, unstructured data (that is, text, voice, pictures or video) and event-related data (when the call was initiated, when the customer entered the Web site or that the person dropped out of the IVR interaction). Several vendors provide products that process structured data for contact center data management and analysis, including AIM Technology, Cisco (through its acquisition of Latigent), Enkata, HardMetrics, Merced Systems, Portrait Software and Symmetrics. Only a few can handle text (such as Attensity) or voice (such as Nice Systems and Verint's Witness Actionable Solutions). It is therefore still difficult to get that a complete, "360-degree view" of customer information.

Our benchmark research reveals that the most popular channel of communication is still one-on-one conversation with an agent. How agents handle calls is therefore vital to the quality of the customer's experience, so much so that consumer research reports show that 40 percent of customers have stopped doing business with a company because of one bad experience talking with an agent. Many things can influence this experience – among them the mood of the caller, the mood of the agent, the type of problem, the abilities of the agent and the agent's level of authority – but the most important, we find, is the support given to agents by the desktops they use to resolve interactions. Most agents have to access multiple systems – sometimes as many as 20 – to resolve a single customer issue; obviously, this can be time-consuming, error-prone and frustrating for both agent and caller. The solution is to deploy a more intelligent desktop that can not only lead an agent through a call but can support the agent at different points during the call with answers to questions raised by the customer or remind the agent to attempt appropriate up-selling or give legally required messages. Vendors such as Chordiant, eglue, Graham Technology, Jacada and Teradata take slightly different approaches to the intelligent desktop, but each has products that can make call-handling more efficient and effective.

The second-most popular channel among customers is the Internet, and most companies now provide some form of self-service through the Web, whether for simple information or a more complete e-business experience. The challenge for companies is to understand the customer's experience when visiting their sites. Traditional Web analytics products give a good picture of the number of hits, time spent on the site and pages and features accessed, but they don't analyze the experience. They also can be cumbersome to implement because they require users to insert tagging at each point they want to monitor. Vendors such as SAS (in partnership with Speedtrap) and Tealeaf have developed techniques that avoid tagging but still capture every click a customer makes while on the site. They can analyze the experience in greater depth, and when integrated with additional customer data, they can point to how the experience could be improved for individual customers or segments. Graham Technology's products allow companies to develop interaction-handling processes and present these in different forms on different channels, thereby ensuring that the customer's experience is consistent across channels.

Assessment

As customers become increasingly remote from companies, how to satisfy them becomes less clear. The fundamental challenge is to understand the customer experience. The basis for doing this well is a complete, up-to-the-minute view of all aspects of doing business with individuals or at least segments of customers. Achieving such a complete view depends on the number of data sources that can be integrated into the view and the ease with which this data can be presented as meaningful information. The task is becoming less difficult as a variety of vendors provide products that capture, assess and analyze more forms of data. However, the complete, 360-degree view remains elusive unless user companies make the effort to integrate several products. If we look toward the future, an important issue is to make this information available for planning – for example, to define more granular customer segments and different strategies for different segments. And the ultimate goal is to make this information available at all points of contact while the interaction is taking place so customers get a consistent, personalized and fulfilling experience, and so choose to come back for more.

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