

The Call Centre Decline?

Today, customers are much more in control of the customer service ‘experience’ they receive from any particular organisation. For many people, this ‘experience’ means an increased reliance on an online digital ‘self-service’ approach with a gradual decline in the traditional channels (like phone or email support) offered by call centres.

Whilst it’s true that customers continue to gravitate towards digital self-service, there will always be those more complex queries or requests that that will mean that it’s still necessary for customers to be able to speak to a Customer Service Agent. And there will always be those customers who are not digitally enabled, who are not online, and who may be ‘vulnerable’ or who for whatever reason will need and want to speak to a customer service agent in the good old fashioned way – by telephone. It’s about always working to the lowest common denominator!

In any event, automated self-service and contact centre channels do not need to compete with each other – as they are (in reality) more complimentary than many people realise. Digital self-service can in fact play a big role in improving the traditional customer service as provided by a call centre.

The ‘Age of the Customer’ has highlighted a number of issues that call centres face:

- Inaccurate or inconsistent answers to customer questions
- High Average Handling Time (AHT)
- Low customer agent morale
- Too many escalated calls - low First Call Resolution (FCR)
- High customer agent turnover
- High training costs
- High operating costs

Not surprisingly, there is a cause-and-effect relationship surrounding these issues.

Knowledge management tools on the customer agent desktop are a common root cause of all manner of problems and avoidable costs. Whilst many organisations have built superior digital portals for their customers to more easily access their own information, customer service agents are toiling with tools that make it difficult to find the answers they’re searching for without piecing together information from multiple screens or memorising a ‘click path’ in order to access the particular content they need. Too often they are beset with unnecessary visual ‘clutter’ on their screens.

So just how can call centres provide their customers with the best possible service?

The solution lies in optimising ‘live’ customer agent desktops with technology akin to that used in ‘bleeding edge’ digital self-service. In order to try and accomplish this, many organisations have simply deployed next generation knowledge management tools (also known as ‘virtual agents’ or ‘virtual assistants’) on customer agent desktops.

These are the very same virtual agent technologies that are now used in online self-service deployments on website or mobile apps, where customers simply key in or ask their questions in natural language and get the right answer instantly.

So, if customer service agents can be equipped with this sort of technology, then call centres have the ability to begin to resolve many of the issues highlighted above.

For example....

Call Centre Challenges that Digital Self-Service can resolve

- **Inaccurate or inconsistent answers to customer questions:** If the right approved answer can be delivered virtually to the customer service agent desktop – then this eliminates the possibility of giving the customer the wrong answer.
- **High average handling time (AHT):** One right answer increases the speed of response to the customer and therefore lowers AHT. It also eliminates informal ‘queues’ that exist within contact centres when agents need to seek help from either another agent or their manager.
- **Low customer agent morale:** Being able to deliver quick and correct answers to questions, as well as being able to provide accurate information, more often than not with one click, reduces stress and frustration. Faster, more accurate responses help agents become better at their job, and achieve performance goals with greater regularity and ease.
- **Too many escalated calls - low First Call Resolution (FCR):** With single approved answers being delivered to customer service agent’s desktops, this greatly reduces escalated calls and improves FCR scores.
- **High customer agent turnover:** A faster, easy-to-use ‘virtual’ agent on the desktop makes the customer service agent’s job far less stressful. The ‘knock-on’ effect is that agents can resolve customer problems quickly and more efficiently, and by that very token have far fewer interactions with frustrated and angry customers.
- **High training costs:** A ‘virtual’ agent system, with instant answer delivery and related questions accessible with one click allows for rapid and streamlined training for customer service agents. The need to learn extraneous systems, with all the other additional paraphernalia can be eliminated.
- **High operating costs:** The cumulative effect of lower AHT, improved FCR, fewer escalations, lower staff turnover and more efficient training results in lower overall operating costs. It also means that you can deliver more with less – and deliver an even more efficient service but with fewer agents.

Organisations in a wide variety of sectors, including local government, have enjoyed impressive results after putting digital self-service tools into the hands of their customer service agents.

If you want to provide an improved and completely consistent customer experience across all customer interaction touch points (website, mobile apps, social media, contact centre) then it is absolutely imperative to provide customer service agents with the technology that customers themselves have access to in the digital self-service world.

Today, it is essential that customer service agents have access to the most ‘up-to-date’ information they need, so that they can deliver high value service to customers in the most optimum way. This means ensuring that they have far greater interaction such as screen-sharing for example, together with access to a potential array of activities that can generate revenue such as upselling and cross-selling.

Ultimately, it is not just your customers or your organisation that benefits. While contact centres and digital self-service would appear to be on opposite sides of the customer spectrum, integrating the two is proven to be highly beneficial for everyone.